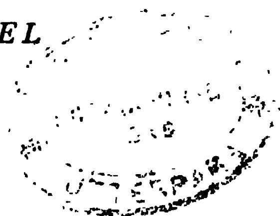
THE WAY OF ESCAPE

THE WAY OF ESCAPE

A NOVEL



BY

GRAHAM TRAVERS

(MARGARET TODD, M.D.)

"The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it."

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON

CONTENTS.

PART I.

PART II.

PART III.

PART IV.

PART I.

THE WAY OF ESCAPE.

CHAPTER I.

FLYING, FLYING SOUTH!

It was a bitter December night, but the *Paris-Lyon* express was speeding gaily along in search of the flowers and the sunshine.

The green shade had been drawn over the lamp; the passengers, wrapped in their furs, were sleeping or feigning to sleep. This night journey was a necessary evil, to be evaded as best it might.

But the morning hours were well advanced before Giles Willoughby closed his eyes. His mood of exaltation left no room for sleep. The cup of life was brimming, and so sweet that he was loath to swallow a single drop untasted. Let him watch through every minute of the night! He had always been something of a thinker, as young men go; but this first journey to a new land,—this break in the steady progress of his life,—gave him an opportunity of readjusting [illegible] focus, of looking at himself fr[illegible] new point [illegible]

Was there something m[illegible]

atmosphere of this pleasant land of France?—or had the brisk salt breeze of the Channel blown away something of the sound Scotch conviction that man at best is but an unprofitable servant? Giles did not care. It was pleasant just for once to see himself in a rosy light,—to compare his achievements, not with his aspirations and dreams, but with the achievements of other men.

An unprofitable servant? Of course he was. But which of his fellow-men would call him so? Ask the professors,—what graduate, taken all round, was the most promising of his year? Would they not point at once to the man who had carried off the blue ribbon,—Giles Willoughby? Ask the sturdy truth-telling minister of that famous Free kirk. Nay, what need to ask him? Had he not been heard to say that men like young Willoughby were the salt of the university and the hope of the Church? Ask the fellows. Giles smiled at the recollection of how the Synod Hall had rung to the echo when the weary Principal had nerved his arm with fresh energy to raise the historic velvet cap above so brilliant a head. (Such a pleasant head too! Not bald nor prematurely grey like some of the others, but crisp and curly and golden, a type of young virility.) Even the famous poet had scarcely received so great an ovation. There was not a single dissentient voice: they all liked him, the fellows; the worst of them at least respected his biceps. Yet he had not sacrificed one jot or one tittle of his duty to win their admiration. He had proved—if indeed in Edinburgh so patent a fact needed proving—that a [illegible]ng man may teach in Sunday-school and go to r[illegible]ecting, and [illegible] be able in case of need to

His face softened as he thought of the minister who had taught him the manliness of religion, and with the thought came a sudden uneasiness at his own frame of mind. A devout Romanist might have crossed himself.

"*Ebenezer*," protested Giles. "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us."

But in another moment the pleasant dream had encircled him again.

It was difficult to see how he could miss success in practice. Everybody liked him in the wards: it was a real pleasure to him to be kind. No doubt it would have been prudent to look out for a rich wife; but at least he had chosen a good wife,—a woman who loved him. In the light that was almost darkness he drew from his breast pocket a leather case and smiled back to the girlish face. It was fair and untried, like thousands more; but to Giles it represented the chosen one.

> "Knowing naught of evil-doing,
> Knowing much of good, dear eyes,"

he murmured softly. "I must write her a good long letter to-morrow." And he proceeded to pass in review the amusing episodes of the journey.

With a sudden sense of space and silence the passengers awoke to find themselves in a great gaslit station. A moment later a blast of icy air cut its way like cold steel to every vulnerable spot, and two middle-aged women were ushered into the compartment. They seemed painfully aware of the unspoken protest their entrance called forth, involving as it did a fundamental readjustment of person and property. [illegible] was Giles who helped them [illegible] the high [illegible] arranged things shipshape [illegible]

his own tall figure into the smallest possible compass. It was Giles who offered to give up his window seat, and who smiled as if their arrival were a real acquisition. The cup of his happiness was so full that it brimmed over at a touch into shallower vessels.

What pleasure there was in being kind to plain women! It meant so much to them, poor souls, who had little to make life worth having. No wonder the other passengers were grumpy. They did not stand on a vantage ground from which past and future looked alike bright and sunny.

Giles leaned back with a sigh and wondered whether it was safe to be so happy.

After all he had his trials like other men. Let him count them up. But they came like laggards to his call. The petty jars of happy home life had faded away in the haze of distance. His health? Giles laughed. He had broken a couple of ribs in a football scrimmage, and the injury had left behind a cough that would almost have escaped notice in a less promising man. "Don't begin the campaign with a flaw in your harness," the old doctor had said. "Go off to the South and play yourself for a month or two. You'll come back as strong as a lion." It was an excuse for a winter holiday, a chance to get through some of that "general reading" which the professors were so fond of recommending. Giles had always maintained that no one need go beyond Scotland in search of beauty, and that Edinburgh alone was sufficient to satisfy the most extravagant claims of culture; but now the romance of sunny Provence thrilled in his veins, and he found himself in a mood akin to pity for those of his ch[illegible]s who had never crossed the [illegible] Hither[illegible] had done what he had planned

to do, what other fellows had tried to do, and he realized for the first time the charm of the unexpected.

Who could tell what mystery lay wrapped in the next few months? The thought was only the plaything of the moment, but it served its turn; and the plain woman opposite smiled with motherly heart at the bright boyish face in the corner.

"I could trust that young man," she thought.

Meanwhile sleep was drawing near.

"God is good," murmured Giles as his eyelids drooped.

And if the words but roughly expressed his thought, he was scarcely to blame; for who at the age of twenty-three shall venture to say that God is good?

CHAPTER II.

SUNNY PROVENCE.

THE hotel stood boldly on a terrace overlooking the Mediterranean. Away down below the waves broke on rugged rocks, and for miles on either side the sunny coast was fringed with fantastic, weird-looking pines. It was a place little known to the ordinary English visitor. In bygone days the building had been a monastery, and the sombre dining-room, seasoned now with the cigars of the genial French *bourgeoisie* who frequented the place, had been the chapel where generations of monks had knelt in prayer.

Noon was already past when Giles thrust the little red phrase-book into his pocket and opened the glass door of the great verandah where the visitors sat at lunch. He felt as if he were going up for an oral examination.

Attracted by the sound of wheels the landlady came bustling out to receive her guest.

"*Veuillez, Madame*——" began Giles in some trepidation.

"*Bonjour, Monsieur,*" said she, smiling with frank admiration of the sunny stalwart figure.

"*Bonjour,*" threw in Giles apologetically. "*Veuillez*——" But there he stuck fast. It is gratuitous brutality on the part of a phrase-book to make a sentence begin with "*Veuillez.*"

The good landlady, however, was all smiles and tact. She noted the leather portmanteau on the carriage outside.

"Monsieur desires a room?" she asked pleasantly. "*Une pièce*," she called it, and how could Giles be expected to know what that meant? To his Scottish mind it suggested bread and butter.

But great is the intuition of the French landlady. In ten minutes the young man's luggage was installed in a comfortable room, and he himself, ensconced in a sunny alcove, was enjoying a dainty lunch and a bottle of good *ordinaire*.

Before him the great blue waves came rolling steadily in, but the mistral lifted the foam from their crests, and chased it gaily eastward in a sunlit fountain of spray. A hedge of aloes stood out grey against the blue, and everywhere was sunshine, such sunshine as gladdens the heart and makes a man's pulses leap.

The scene on the verandah was unconventional enough.

The company numbered about a dozen, but a single waiter kept them fairly well in hand. Although eminently good natured on the whole, the guests considered it only due to themselves to manifest occasional signs of impatience, striking their glasses with their knives, and calling, "Gustave! Gustave!"

A brilliantly coloured parrot took up the cry. "Gustave! Gustave!" he shrieked, and laughed ironically. Then, having attracted sufficient attention, he sang a few bars of an operatic air, and burst into a torrent of incomprehensible *argot*. Dogs of varying size and breed wandered from table to table, claiming a bone, or condescending to have it thrust upon them according as immediate wants and past experience had

moulded their attitude to life in general. The smallest of these animals might easily have been accommodated in Willoughby's coat pocket, the largest could just lay his black muzzle comfortably on the white cloth, while one chose the morsel he fancied. With the appearance of coffee and fruit, the meal lost its interest from the canine point of view, and this part of the community withdrew to a greater distance. Some of them brawled joyously among themselves, while others, relaxing their supple limbs, fell contentedly asleep on the warm flags in the sunshine.

It was all so primitive and picturesque that Giles felt as if he had been transported back into the middle ages.

"What a letter it would make!" he thought; and, almost annihilating two small chambermaids, who stood gossiping, pail in hand, on the narrow and angular staircase, he hastened to his room and unpacked his writing-case while the mood was on him.

"Won't she think herself a lucky girl!" he thought with an affectionate smile, as he fitted the closely written sheets into an envelope. Then he wrote a "duty post-card" to his people at home, and, throwing himself on the bed in a great shaft of sunshine, fell into a dreamless sleep.

. . . .

He woke to a world that was dark and chill, to a surging sea that had lost its note of joyousness.

Giles groped vainly for his matches, and then hastily opened the door of his room.

The narrow passage outside was furnished with a lamp whose main function seemed to be the deposit of soot on the low ceiling overhead, a lamp which shed forth dinginess rather than light, and emphasized anew

the unevenness of wall and floor. Its feeble rays enabled him to find the matches, however, and a small opaque-looking candle. That lighted, he stepped through the open window on to the balcony beyond.

After all, the night was not absolutely dark. He could see the white caps rolling in; and for hundreds of yards from the shore the sea was churned into a white blanket of foam. To the right a mystery of pine-trees stood out black against the sky. Giles shivered as he closed the window. What a noise the waves did make to be sure! One could have enough of that music in time. And what a wind! Already his little candle had guttered half away. He tried to remould the melting wax with a feeling almost of pity for the poor wasted thing. Then, ignoring the comfortable arm-chair, he seated himself on the edge of his bed in a mood of inexplicable dreariness. Had he been superstitious, he might have called it a foreboding of evil. Not a human soul within reach could speak the language he spoke. For the first time in his life, with a force of realization that was vivid as a lightning flash, he felt himself alone,—absolutely cut adrift in space.

To what hasty action his unaccustomed depression might have led it is difficult to say, for almost at that moment the neighbourhood resounded with the cheerful tones of the dinner-bell. It hung out of doors, that queer old bell, and had once called the monks to prayer, but Giles knew nothing of that. He grasped at the friendly omen. A minute before he had been out in the immensities, as it were; and now, in the twinkling of an eye, a little door had sprung ajar in the darkness, revealing a flood of light from a genial, commonplace world. What a comfort they are, those little doors! How they help to keep one sane! As

Giles hurriedly unpacked his evening shoes and immaculate coat, he absolutely forgot that the immensities were there.

He felt rather apologetic as, some ten minutes later, he hurried down to the sombre vaulted dining-room, almost stumbling here and there over an unexpected step or sharply sloping piece of floor; but punctuality was not one of the distinguishing virtues of the guests at St Vincent, and the only respect in which he found himself exceptional was in the fact of his having changed his dress for dinner.

"I don't believe the others have even washed their faces," he reflected severely, and this led him on to the still more censorious reflection that some of the faces *wouldn't* wash,—one especially being "got-up" to an extent that made an honest Scotchman uneasy. With great magnanimity, however, Giles decided that in all probability the lady was "only French." She was pretty too, in a way, with curious golden hair, and he felt almost guilty of an indiscretion when he saw the jewelled fingers manipulate a cutlet bone with a dexterity that only long practice could have bestowed. Of course there was serious competition among the dogs for the reversion of that bone, and a spoilt pug who got mauled in the encounter was speedily consoled by the breast of a partridge.

"Mediævaler and mediævaler," Giles said to himself as the snapping and snarling waxed loud, and he glanced down to make sure that the floor was not strewn with rushes. His professional studies had left him little leisure for the pursuit of history, but the idea of rushes had gone home.

He became less severe as the meal went on. The wine was good; the *menu* was excellent; the guests

looked at him with friendly eyes; and—judging from the frequent peals of laughter—wit flourished like flowers in May.

Giles was disgusted at his own *gaucherie* in not understanding the jokes. "Half an hour's daily application for the last year would have done it," he said; and then he fell back for consolation on the inherent superiority of the British nation.

The landlady awaited him at the door. "Monsieur will go into the salon?" she said, smiling.

Giles shook his head.

"Pity that no one here speaks English. I myself say but a few words—'T'ank you,' 'Good-night.' But an English savant comes in a few days with his daughter. *Elle est gentille, n'est-ce pas, madame? et très-originelle.*"

The "*N'est-ce pas, madame?*" drew the young man's attention for the first time to the lady at his elbow. It was the golden-haired heroine of the cutlet bone.

"Monsieur must not refuse to come into the salon," she said graciously. "I cannot speak English, but I will sing to him."

CHAPTER III.

THE EYES OF A WITCH.

"THE truth is," continued the savant, "we have had enough of axioms. What we want is observations."

"Ye-es," assented Giles vaguely.

"For surely the smallest discovery concerning the beetle's wing or the palate of the snail is of more value than all the mediæval calculations as to the number of angels who could poise on the point of a needle."

"Oh, yes."

"And how many present-day philosophisings and pulpit lucubrations should be relegated to the same limbus as the angels! Cobweb-spinning! Cobweb-spinning!" He laughed rather cynically. "I saw a spider the other day choose my pipe for one of his *points d'appui*. He took that for an axiom." The savant did not speak argumentatively at all. He was one of those people who must either give utterance to their actual thoughts or be silent. "Look, for instance, at the work my friend Romanes did a few years ago on the jelly-fishes. I would rather have done that than have spun out the whole philosophy of Hegel."

"Really, sir? Would you indeed?" Giles broke forth eagerly. He felt himself on safer ground now. He was ignorant of the special work on the *Medusæ*, but he was one of the few medical students who con-

trive to wedge a course of Moral Philosophy into their curriculum. It was unfortunate for the interests of philosophy at the moment that the course had been taken in Edinburgh, and not at that stronghold of Hegelianism—Glasgow. "I confess Hegel was always too many for me," he said frankly. "I never could get beyond the Being and Not-being business; but some of the fellows seemed to make something of it." He was proceeding to say that, despite this disqualification, he had succeeded in carrying off a first-class in the subject, when the savant mercifully intervened.

"Did you see," he asked with his rare smile, "that some one the other day compared the philosophy of Hegel to the Emperor's new clothes in Hans Andersen's story? When all the rest are admiring the princely attire, it requires courage or self-conceit—not to say gross tactlessness—to be the first to say, 'He has got nothing on!'"

Giles broke into a great boyish laugh of genuine appreciation,—so genuine that the savant turned to him with fresh interest, as if to determine his species. Giles quite realized that up to this point he had been merely *genus* listener. He would gladly have followed up his advantage with a clever remark; but the clever remark did not suggest itself.

"Shall we go for a stroll?" said the wise man. "It is pleasant here, but cold." He had been sitting on the low parapet of the verandah, forming, in his slouch hat and Inverness cape, a picturesque silhouette against the sea. "I wonder what brought you to this quaint corner of the globe?"

"The merest accident. I fell into conversation with a man on the boat, and told him how I hated the idea of a big Riviera hotel. He mentioned the place,—

said I should probably find it empty at this time of year."

"So it usually is, or I should not be here. I thought perhaps you had been attracted by the growing reputation of Professor Brillat's little marine station?"

"No," said Giles. He was about to add that he had never heard of the marine station, but decided that the confession was unnecessary.

"They are doing some capital work there. My daughter is drawing some of Brillat's slides and preparations for me."

"I expect you find her quite a help in your work."

There was no doubt about the savant's smile this time. "I do, indeed."

"*Gentille, n'est-ce pas, et très-originelle,*" thought Giles. A mental picture rose before him of a tall girl with calm broad forehead and earnest eyes. She wore spectacles like her father, and she inherited his slender, stooping figure. Very "originelle," no doubt, from poor Madame's point of view. Giles, of course, had lived in Edinburgh, and knew what clever women were.

"She has a gift for truth," continued the savant meditatively, "that is rare in either sex. She says what she thinks and she draws what she sees. If she ever does research work of her own—as I quite hope she may—she will not be one of those of whom Darwin said, 'Ah, I never read a page of him without thinking, There's five or six years' work for anyone to see whether that's true.'"

"I expect she owes a great deal to her teacher, sir." The picture of the tall girl in the spectacles became more vivid in the young man's mind.

The scientist seemed pleased. "Ah, no doubt, no

doubt. But the world would be a fine place if all depended on the teachers."

It was a glorious morning. The rough country road was hedged with roses and tall bamboos. Beyond stretched fields, aglow with flowers, to the foot of the tree-clad hills.

They entered a copse of pine-trees whose branches formed endless elaborate settings for the turquoise of the sea. Giles drew a long breath. "I expected palm-trees here," he said, "but never pines. They smell like home. *What's that?*"

On a horizontal branch, swaying gently to and fro, sat a girl, but the quaintest figure of a girl that Giles had ever seen. She wore a short skirt, and a loose brown coat, fastened with a leathern belt. A vivid red tie was knotted carelessly round her neck, and a great untrimmed beaver hat completed her accoutrement.

"It looks," said Giles, "like a cross between a sprite and a buccaneer."

The savant smiled, well pleased. He had never attempted to reduce women to a science. "Allow me," he said, "to introduce you to my daughter,—Dr Willoughby—Vera Carruthers. Dr Willoughby is a friend of Professor Garston's, dear."

The girl rose to her feet in the graceful, awkward fashion beseeming her years. "An Englishman—here?" she said.

"Fortunately for him," Giles responded gallantly; but she passed the compliment on.

"It is lovely, isn't it?" she said, looking out over the sea. Was she pretty? He could not make up his mind; but how she would be stared at in Princes Street!

"Glorious!" he assented. "I can scarcely believe in the fogs that I left behind." Was her hair brown or black? It was neither: it was dusky: and it did not curl; it *fluffed*—in great clusters about her brow and ears and neck. Giles had never seen hair in the least like it before.

"Have you been here long?"

"Yes,—that is—No; only a few days."

The daughter of a savant—her father's assistant—how came she by those roguish gleams in her eyes? Ah, the eyes were the eyes of a witch.

The conversation jerked on for a few minutes more, and then Mr Carruthers took out his watch. "I am going to look in at the laboratory," he said. "Do you care to come with me?"

Giles shrugged his shoulders. "I have been sent all this way to *escape* laboratories," he protested ruefully. "I will stay and play with Miss Carruthers, if she will let me."

The girl's face was not altogether discouraging. "I beg to state," she said severely, as she watched her father's retreating figure, "that I was engaged in meditation."

But Giles had not looked into those eyes for nothing. "So now you can play with an easy mind." He threw himself down on the carpet of pine-needles in a quiet masterful fashion, and his eyes fell involuntarily on her feet. He wondered how his sisters would like to wear such boots.

Of course she read his thoughts in a moment. "Aren't they awful?" she said, frankly extending one foot. "Hygienic boots are one of the fads I haven't been able to educate Father out of. He thinks Nature has taken so long to evolve the human foot and the

female waist that it is a pity to tamper with them unnecessarily."

"Quite right," said Giles.

"*Unnecessarily*, of course," she repeated with some asperity. "The question is,—*Is* it necessary?"

"Not in the least." The young man's smile was almost fatherly. "Quite the reverse."

"You think so? Well, that is one man's opinion. I confess I haven't made up my mind. In any case it doesn't do to be always agreeing with one's daddy; so what I tell *him* is that Nature never meant us to wear boots at all. If you are going to accept a convention, in Heaven's name *accept the convention*, and make no bones about it. I hate compromise. It is a shuffling thing,—like my boots." She held out the other foot this time, and laughed light-heartedly. "Now, don't you call that a typical compromise?" she said.

"I don't think it shuffles," Giles replied reassuringly. "It seems to me admirable. I will recommend it to my lady patients."

A third person would have appreciated her smile.

"Your lady patients!" she said. "If your Father means to settle £400 a year on you to start with, Mr— I beg your pardon,—*Doctor* Willoughby,—you can afford,—*perhaps*,—to recommend this sort of thing to *your lady patients*. But don't lay a blighted career at my door."

"Yet the boots don't seem to interfere with your happiness much?"

"Don't they? Ah, but I am—just me, you see; and my daddy's my daddy." She paused, meditated, and made a fresh start. "Did you ever think, Dr Willoughby, what a comfort it is that we can always shift our circle of happiness? Here is mine." She

drew one hastily with her stick in the carpet of pine-needles. "Now, there are the boots,—a disturbing factor. Not in the centre of the circle, of course, but well in,—like the three little sisters. 'Daddy,' say I, 'remove those boots.' Daddy declines. So what do I do? I take a new centre and draw a fresh circle, thus, —*ex-clu-ding* the boots. Oh, I have left a toe in! Never mind. See?"

"I see," Giles answered doubtfully.

"My poor little mother never could have done that. She had such lots of lovely French shoes! That is the advantage of being born a generation later."

"You think we are progressing then?"

Her smile of absolute confidence was pretty to see.

"*Progressing!*" she said.

She returned to her diagram, and Giles helped her to obliterate the intrusive toe.

"And do you mean to do this with all the sorrows of life?" he asked.

She nodded defiantly. "Of course I do,—so long as there is room to draw a fresh circle."

"But is that quite fair?" Giles hesitated and went on bravely. "Is it not cowardly?—like playing truant from school? Don't you believe in the—the—what they call the discipline of sorrow?"

"The discipline of sorrow?" She shivered. "Of course I believe in it; but I mean to dodge it all I can. Is it not the same thing as the discipline of tight shoes? —a hindrance to true evolution?"

"God forbid!"

"I am sure my father would say so."

"Your father is an——?" Giles dismissed various words—Utilitarian, Hedonist, Epicurean,—as likely to give offence.

But Vera apparently was not sensitive on the subject. "Old heathen? Shocking. It is his one redeeming feature. So am I."

The meaning was not very clear, but Giles understood.

"Dear Dad," continued the girl, "I am thankful that, with all his fads, he doesn't believe in self-sacrifice and all those musty old things."

Giles was appalled. And yet there was something exhilarating in thus coming face to face with the heresies which hitherto had existed for him only in the text-books. In this most out-of-the-way corner of the globe he felt that he was really tasting life.

"Just look round," she said, "at the sunshine and the blue sea between the pine-trees. Listen to the waves and the birds. Let them *sink in*." . . . She paused. . . . "And then say to yourself slowly and impressively, '*The mortification of the flesh.*'" She shuddered. "Isn't it *nasty?*"

The young man's manner was cold as ice. "I ought to apologize for the old-fashioned question," he said; "but do you mind telling me what you take to be man's chief end?"

"I don't mind in the least; but I never thought about it. Man's chief end,—man's chief end,—'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.'?"

"Now you are posing."

She rose to her feet in real indignation. "I never pose," she said. "Let me eat and drink of the good and great and beautiful——"

"That's not fair," protested Giles.

"Isn't it?" The roguish eyes laughed out from under the buccaneer hat. "Then give me a bottle of claret and a dainty little ragout. It is all the same.

Nothing comes amiss. Goodbye, Dr Willoughby. I am late, I must run."

Giles looked rather angry. "And you admit that you have got to die like the rest of us," he said brutally.

"Ugh, yes. When my time comes. How horrid of you to remind me of it!" She certainly looked the incarnation of life as she stood there in the sunlight, and now her red lips curved in a delicious pout. "You *said* you were going to *play!*"

But the young man was obdurate. "Shall you be able to shift your circle *then?*"

"I don't know. Shall you?"

"I don't choose to," he said doggedly—

> "I would hate that death bandaged my eyes and forebore,
> And bade me creep past!"

A wistful light shone for a moment in her hazel eyes; but it was gone before he was sure it was there.

"Goodbye," she repeated absently. "I suppose you are going away to-morrow, Dr Willoughby?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. People like you always do go away to-morrow."

She hesitated, and drew a fresh design among the pine-needles at her feet. "Are you sure my boots don't shuffle, Dr Willoughby?" she said, "or did you only say it to comfort me?"

He laughed. "So you have left a toe in your circle after all? I haven't had a chance yet to make sure whether they shuffle or not. Wait a moment. I am coming."

But she had sprung away with a step as light as a doe.

And so it came about that Giles was flushed and a little out of breath when they entered the hotel together.

The golden-haired lady who had sung to him in the salon was seated in an alcove by the door, but he did not see her.

"*Ces anglaises!*" said she.

CHAPTER IV.

CHALICE OR QUASSIA-BOWL?

IT was Christmas morning,—the first Christmas Giles had ever spent away from home.

Most of the little community had gone to mass, and the place was very quiet. From his bedroom window Giles caught sight of a brown beaver hat on the verandah below. A moment later he found Vera swinging to and fro under a gaily-striped awning, with a great sheaf of galley-slips in her hand.

"What!" she said. "You too among the goats?"

"I don't understand you."

She sighed. "I wish you wouldn't pretend to be stupid whenever you think me profane. Why don't you say '*Vade Satana!*' or make the sign of the cross? It would be so much more picturesque. Why aren't you at church?"

"Because there doesn't happen to be a church within reach."

She laughed quietly. "You Christians!"

"Don't!" said Giles. "Spare that word. As it happens, I never have gone to church on Christmas-day. We don't go in much for observing days and seasons and months and years."

"Don't you? Why not, if the day brings a gift, the season flowers, the years"—her face grew almost grave

—"wisdom? To what particular form of schism do you belong, Dr Willoughby?"

He frowned. "If it interests you at all to know it, I belong to the Free Church of Scotland."

"Am I horrid?"

"Sometimes."

"Thank you. Few of us escape that distinction." She turned to him suddenly with a coaxing, kitten-like movement, and her face broke into irresistible dimples. "And sometimes nice?"

"Fairly."

"No, no. Fairly won't do. Sometimes *very* nice?"

The corners of his mouth quivered. "Sometimes."

"So nice that you would like to spend Christmas morning with me?"

"Quite so. If I may."

Her manner changed in a moment. "Well," she said judicially, "that depends. I leave you to decide whether I was not better employed before you came. I was thanking Heaven for my mercies."

He seated himself deliberately. "We might do that together," he said. "How far had you got?"

"I began with my natural inheritance, and had just got to my parents."

"There's a little overlapping there, isn't there?"

"The other evening at supper," she said with apparent irrelevance, "my father and a crony of his, Dr Smith, were having a tremendous discussion. I always try very hard to understand; for of course"—she glanced at the "galleys" on her lap—"the only thing I am good for is helping my father a little bit. But it *was* hard! In a sense I did follow——"

Giles laughed, thinking of sundry similar experiences of his own. "I know," he said with unintentional

cruelty, "as one follows the fox after a spill in which one's foot has caught in the stirrup."

She winced almost imperceptibly, but would not show that she was hurt. "That is the sort of thing," she said, "but I was in at the death. 'In short,' my father said, 'there is a sense in which our parents are little more than the chalice in which the wine of our natural inheritance is carried over from one generation to another.' Dr Smith puckered up his grim old face. 'There is something *too* irresponsive about a chalice. Couldn't you make it——?' 'A quassia-bowl,' suggested Dad. And then they both laughed a great deal, and agreed that the quassia-bowl had it."

"Well you did carry off the brush that time," said Giles admiringly. "How like a woman!" he thought to himself.

It was by no means every medical student in those days who had even heard of Weismarn, but one of young Willoughby's teachers had been among the first to misconceive the epoch-making idea. "It's all nonsense, you know," said Giles; "it's a sheer question of osmosis."

He expected "osmosis" to take her out of her depth, but—"womanlike"—she left him in complete uncertainty as to whether it had done so or not.

"Personally, I prefer a chalice to a quassia-cup," she said. "In fact I think a chalice is rather nice. You can't eat it, of course, but you take it up between your sips of wine, and fondle it, and study its quaint tracery, and it sinks into your being just as much as the wine does. You see I have such a splendid chalice. You know my father. Well, my mother was just as wonderful in her way. She was an actress

—a Frenchwoman—so impulsive, so full of life. Don't you think I am a lucky girl?"

Giles stooped to pick an imaginary something from the floor. Actresses and Mothers,—the words belonged to two entirely different categories of thought.

"A combination like that suggests possibilities, doesn't it?" she pursued.

"It does indeed."

"And that is the one thing I ask. If life will give me scope, I'll undertake to live it. Some people have got to be the children of a provincial parson who marries the schoolmaster's daughter. *Isn't it awful?*"

"I think you are a very lucky girl to be the daughter and companion of a clever man like your father; but of course the situation has its disadvantages too."

She laid her right forefinger against the thumb of her left hand, and looked at him enquiringly. "For instance?" she said.

"Well,—you hear all sorts of profound conversations, and you get into the way of talking—as girls don't talk."

An expression of awe came over her face, and she looked at him for some moments in silence. Then—"*How shocking!*" she said in a low voice. She caught up the galley-slips to serve as a fan, and a shallow simper glassed over the depths of her eyes. "Oh, Dr Willoughby" she cried, "I should so shrink from doing or saying anything you could possibly consider *unladylike!*"

Giles frowned. "That is not how girls talk!" he protested indignantly, "not the girls I meet at any rate."

"Of course not!" Her hands dropped into her lap, and her attitude became one of demure simplicity.

"The girls *you* meet believe that woman's true mission is to smooth the bed of sickness." She tapped the ground with her toe, and set herself rocking defiantly. "And the Lord deliver me from their ministrations!" she cried.

She had carried through her little impersonations with so much *verve* and self-confidence, that Giles was amazed. He could well believe in that "chalice" of hers. "You are a witch," he said, "you have no true self. It is useless to argue with you."

Her face fell. He had drawn blood this time. "Oh, don't say that!" she cried. "I would rather—even—be told home truths. I *love* arguing."

Giles looked out over the sea, and pointed his lips as if to whistle.

"You were about to say—?" she began insinuatingly.

No answer.

"—when I interrupted you—?"

No answer.

"—in that most *unladylike* fashion—?"

Still no answer.

"—that I pick up a jargon I don't understand, and give other people—including myself—the impression of a knowledge I don't possess. Was that it?"

"Approximately," he replied with the utmost *sang-froid*, "*other* people, *including yourself*."

She looked somewhat taken aback. "And this," she said, "is the sort of thing we are supposed theoretically to be grateful for! Well, I suppose it was good of you, Dr Willoughby."

"It was not good at all," said Giles with a sudden change of feeling. "I believe it was what we call in Scotland sheer dounricht deevilry."

She clapped her hands. "Come, that *was* good of you," she said. "'Dounricht deevilry' is so much nicer than Christian admonishments."

Giles took a turn up and down the verandah. "Your chalice being such as you describe," he said. "May I ask how you come by the—the pietistic tags that embellish your conversation?"

She drew herself up with offended dignity. "My mother went to mass regularly," she said, as if that were only the correct thing for one's *mother* to do; "and besides"—she paused and sighed,—"three years after she died my father made another experiment. He married a—a—what you, I suppose, would call a pietist."

"It is most unlikely that I should call her anything of the kind!" protested Giles, but she was not listening.

"I have come to the conclusion," she said with an air of profound wisdom, "that it is useless to expect *any* man to keep his head when he is in love; and if he does keep his head,—so much the worse for him!"

Giles did not feel disposed to follow her into these depths. "And how do you and your stepmother get on?" he asked.

Vera shook her head ruefully. "Not well," she confessed, "and, indeed, not even badly. We don't get on at all. I made an honest effort, and I believe she did the same; but the result only proved that some honest efforts are better left unmade. You see she thinks I corrupt the children."

"Yes."

She leaned forward and clasped her hands. "So I am simply waiting to see how it turns out," she

said quietly. "It will be interesting to learn whether her children are an improvement on my mother's child."

Giles expected to see her laugh, but she was perfectly serious.

"Then you are quite content," he said, determined to probe a mystery to its depths, "simply to be your charming self?"

She shook her dusky hair lower over her brow, then poked herself solemnly in the chest, and made believe to wince. "It's alive," she said in a mysterious whisper. "*It grows!*"

At that moment the door of the verandah opened and Mr Carruthers appeared, looking somewhat distraught. He glanced nervously at a large additional table which was laid for *déjeuner*. "I hear a number of excursionists are coming over," he said; "and I suppose this sort of thing will go on all through the holidays. Vera, dear,"—he hesitated—"I have seen such a charming little villa this morning. It stands in its own grounds—a mass of trees and shrubs—with a gate leading on to the beach. There is a nice old couple in charge, and the rent is extremely moderate at this time of year." He paused and looked at his daughter almost deprecatingly.

She slipped two white fingers into his half-closed hand. "Is it *drefful* lonesome?" she asked with a wistful smile.

"N—no," he said doubtfully; "no, I think not. It is beautifully quiet."

"That I believe." She stifled a sigh. "All right, Dad; we'll go and see it this afternoon. Tell Dr Willoughby he must come and cheer us up."

"I am sure we shall be pleased to see him," said the

savant absently. The first carriage-load of people had driven up, and as they noisily burst open the glass door, his face assumed an expression almost of terror. "Tell Gustave to bring a cutlet to my room," he said, "and—and some *œufs sur le plat*,—I am not coming down."

Vera made a movement as if to follow him, and then changed her mind. She was looking rather forlorn. "You may take that as a done thing," she said; "I shouldn't wonder if we moved this afternoon."

Giles did not reply. It would have been impossible to give expression to the conflict of feelings within him. Perhaps he was mainly conscious of relief.

"You will come and cheer us up, won't you?" Her lower lip trembled like a child's.

The pause before he answered was almost imperceptible. "Of course I will," he said cheerily, "if—if your father does not object."

She moved towards the house. "Oh, Dad!" she said serenely, "he won't know till the sixth time that you are the same person who came before."

"That is flattering. And you?"

"I think," she said, looking over her shoulder sedately, "that I shall probably recognize you about the fifth time."

With much noise of shouts and singing, a second carriage drove up, and the dogs raised a chorus of enquiry. Nobody had explained to them that it was Christmas-day. Suddenly a shrill howl of pain drowned every other sound. The wheel of the carriage had gone over a pretty little King Charles.

In three great strides Giles reached the spot, and

raised the little sufferer with the gentle touch of the born surgeon.

"Bring me some old linen," he said to Vera—"clean for choice."

"Yes," she answered faintly; "and shall I send one of the men to help you?"

"No, you can come yourself."

She shook her head: her face was very pale. "I am not much good at these things," she said, "but I will send——"

"Then it is time you learned," he interrupted imperiously.

So Vera did his behest, and followed him obediently to the old pump in the garden.

CHAPTER V.

ON THE THRESHOLD.

VERA'S prognostication proved right. That very afternoon saw two modest valises placed on the box of the lumbering old landau, while a number of mysterious cases were roped on behind.

Giles stood bareheaded in the road till the vehicle had passed round the corner.

Vera had not again entreated him to call and cheer her up. On the contrary, she had gone off in the gayest spirits, apparently looking forward with keen anticipation to her toy *ménage*.

"After all, she is half French," said Giles. "She will have forgotten by to-morrow that she ever met me."

He turned to find the landlady's eyes fixed on him sympathetically. "*Ce pauvre monsieur!*" said she. "Fortunately they have not gone very far."

Giles smiled absently in reply. "I will call to-morrow," he said to himself, "because I have promised to call, and the next day I will go."

The verandah looked rather squalid when he pushed open the door. Gustave, behindhand with his work, and looking rather blear-eyed after his Christmas dinner, was mournfully humming the *Adeste Fideles* as he swept the crumbs into a heap on the tiles. Perhaps the general dreariness was reflected in Giles'

face, for an old naval officer, who sat smoking his cigar on the parapet, good-naturedly tried to enter into conversation with him.

"One need not say so before the ladies," he said, "but she is divine, *la petite anglaise*—simply divine. She is one of the few that nature turns out at first hand; the rest are laborious copies."

A minute later Giles turned to go indoors. "I will call to-morrow," he said, "because I promised to call, and the next day I will go."

How dark and deserted the house looked as he passed in out of the sunshine! How the soul seemed to have gone out of it! Giles sprang upstairs and opened the door of his room.

Ah, that was better! The sun-laden air streamed through the casements. He went out on the balcony and breathed in the freshness of sea and sky. Yes, now he could breathe. No walls separated him from her now. The same sun shone on both——

What!

"Nonsense!" said Giles scornfully. Then he laughed. "Little witch!" he murmured, "how perfectly ridiculous!" The idea just crossed his mind that it might be well to go away at once,—this very afternoon; but he dismissed it as absurd.

"I promised to call," he said, "and I will call *once*. It would be weak to do anything else, and, besides, it would be unkind." He threw himself into a chair, with his hands in his pockets, and began to whistle. A smile—a quite new smile—crept over his face, breaking its way through lines that might fairly have supposed themselves permanent. Oh, yes, he meant to call once. It would be rather interesting to see the little witch again—now that—now that——

Now that what?

"Oh, bother!" cried Giles, and, snatching up a book, he endeavoured to read.

A great stillness hung over land and sea. The sun, from its home in the west, threw out a rosy glow behind the grim dark pine-trees. It was very lovely, that soft pink flush, but it deepened and burned to a red that was almost awful, and the night grew chill.

. . . .

So Giles stood on the threshold of the Enchanted Palace, enjoying its sunny exposure, and believing himself proof against all its blandishments; for was he not armed with the triple steel of religion, loyalty, and common-sense? There are dangers, surely, to which a man of principle is not liable.

For twenty-four hours more this little incident would last. To-morrow he would bring it gracefully to a close. "Mademoiselle, the pleasure has been great. Adieu." In the meantime, why not give himself up to the sunshine of the hour? It was something so new, this feeling,—so different from the deliberate affection he felt for the girl of his choice.

If we really weighed our pleasures and pains in the balance, as some profess to do, the hours that followed would have ranked very high in the young man's life; but at the time he was conscious only of a sense of incompleteness, of looking forward. When at length he reached the gate of the secluded villa, he was dimly aware that the little incident had assumed an importance out of all proportion to its real place in his life.

A pleasant, motherly-looking woman in a white sun-bonnet opened the door.

"Mademoiselle Carruthers?"

"Not at home."

Three times Giles made her repeat the answer before he could take it in. Not at home? Impossible! She must be at home. The leading lady absent from the last act of the comedy?

"But I leave to-morrow," he protested feebly.

There was no doubt about the real regret in the woman's eyes. "*Dommage!*" she said, "Mademoiselle went out with her father, and they won't be back till late. They bring a friend to supper."

Giles turned to go, but the thought of that dusty highroad was intolerable. "I think your garden opens on the beach," he said in his broken French. "May I go through that way?"

"Ah, with pleasure!"

It was some relief to enter the quiet greenness of the garden. What an afternoon this might have been! Oh, faithless Vera! Did she not know that he would come? He noted a waving arbour of fresh green bamboos. Her gay silk cushions lay on the seat—one still indented with that dusky head of hers, little sybarite!

The old woman took a rusty key from its nail in the wall and opened the door. "*Dommage!*" she said again sympathetically.

Giles nodded and thanked her, strode a few paces along the rocks, and then, as he heard the key creak in the door behind him, threw himself down on the beach and supported his chin in his hands.

For the last twenty-four hours nothing in the world save this meeting had existed for him, and now——

Yes; that was precisely the question,—What was

to be done now? Why had he been such a fool as to say that he was leaving to-morrow? And yet, of course he must leave to-morrow. He had made up his mind; and did not the difference between him and less successful men lie just in this, that when he had made up his mind he set his teeth and saw the thing through?

CHAPTER VI.

MAGIC IN THE AIR.

LIKE the tactful Frenchwoman she was, the *femme de ménage* made no mention of Willoughby's call till she found Vera alone.

"Only an hotel acquaintance," the girl answered, laughing; but she turned rather white when she heard that Giles was to leave the next day. She had begun to assume that he would remain at St Vincent as long as she did, and it was not easy at first to picture the quiet days relieved by no more friendly sparring. Giles was not a very uncommon type, but he was new to her. She loved to shock him, and to feel that he disapproved of her opinions. She loved his masterfulness too—his quiet assumption that, in spite of her audacity, she would follow his lead when the crucial moment came. No one before had dared to tell her that her knowledge was superficial, and the calmness with which he had said it went thrilling through her anew as no flattery had ever done. Was it not indeed the subtlest form of flattery? She wished now that she had steadily refused to help him with the dog. How weak she had been! If only they could meet once more—just long enough for her to make it quite, quite clear that she would not do the thing he wanted!—that

she was free as air in spite of that lordly way of his. "Then it is time you learned." There had been no pose about the words at all. He had simply not realized that she might refuse. Oh, if she only had! Yet the very memory of the words brought a glow over her face.

He was such a fine fellow, too—so big and manly! Everybody said so. And those hands of his went about their work so strongly and easily! His pious notions were absurdly out of date, of course; but—as her father had said of some one else—he had simply had no time to bring his intellect to bear on these things.

Ugh, this tiresome supper,—this toilsome science! How meaningless they had become! Was there the tiniest chance that Giles might come again?

She took from her simple wardrobe a white silk frock, and dressed with nervous haste. Some white flowers stood in a vase on the table, and, twisting them into a loose chain, she placed them on her head. The soft waves of her hair caught at them with a force that seemed magnetic. The twisted stems sank out of sight, and the flowers shone forth like jewels from their setting. Oh, if only Dr Willoughby would come! What a fool she had been to let him see her only in tom-boy attire! Surely she was pretty? But what did her father care?—or this dull old scientist who was to share their evening meal?

Slowly, slowly, the hours went by, but no friendly ring at the bell came to quicken her lagging pulse. At last she could bear it no longer; and, well aware that she would not now be missed, she threw a shawl round her shoulders and slipped out into the garden.

The moon was approaching the full, and the vivid

light almost startled her. It was difficult to feel oneself alone while the palms were tossing their arms in the air, and the sea kept calling, calling.

The distance was very short from the hotel if one came along the beach. Was it possible that any man could remain contentedly in that stuffy salon, playing cards with the golden-haired lady? And suppose he came—would he find the door locked? Perhaps he had already come—and gone.

The idea had scarcely taken form in her mind before it assumed the proportions of a disaster. All her life she had acted on impulse, and she acted on impulse now. Groping in the deep shadow, she found the key and fitted it into the lock. How stiff it was! Would it never turn? She scarcely noticed that it bruised her tender hands. At last it creaked grudgingly round, and she dragged open the door.

She dared not venture out, for, beyond the shade of the trees, the night seemed lighter than day. The moon was not ploughing its familiar golden path across the sea; but as each wave rose to a lordly height, a diadem, vivid as fire, played along its crest, then fell in scattered jewels on the water.

Vera stood entranced. Only the night before she would have run to tell her father of the marvellous sight, but now—but now she wanted to share it with some one else.

Alas, she was dreaming. He would not come. And yet in that momentary peep she had surely caught sight of something. Was it the shadow of a tree?—or was it——? Trembling, she closed the door, and crept back to the arbour.

. . . .

Giles could not have told what led him along the

beach that night. He knew the gate was locked, and he knew that Vera was indoors entertaining her father's guest. He could see the curve of her sensitive mouth as she talked, and the mischievous sparkle in her eye. "Simply divine." It was a shocking thing to say; and yet—great Jove!—how true it was! The world had undergone a transformation for Giles, and the relative values of all things were changed. He knew the old motives and incentives would resume their rightful place, but to-night—just to-night—they were hateful to him. He wanted Vera.

He tried hard to read, but his room was a contracting chamber. He must get out.

And, once out, was there any choice as to the direction in which he should walk? If there had been, the sea would soon have put an end to all uncertainty. It seemed determined to block his way,—chased, white and foaming, into every cranny, and danced defiantly over the rocks. Giles was glad to have something to oppose. He was not going to be beaten by the sea.

Presently his way led through a "shave" of pines, then out again into the open, but higher up this time, where he too could see the moon play like forked lightning on the crest of the waves. There was magic in the air to-night.

And here—was the gate.

It was locked of course. What a fool he had been not to go round the other way and simply ring the bell! But he should have been an hour or two earlier for that.

And now there was nothing for it but simply to turn and go home. He thought of those pretty cushions, and wondered whether they had been left out on the

wooden seat. The door was locked, yet, since he was here, was there any harm in giving it a little push? Of course it would not yield——

But it did yield.

And so they met, face to face, startled, silent.

If they had foreseen the meeting, each might have been prepared with so simple an explanation, but in the twinkling of an eye the time for that was past. There was so much to explain if they once began.

And yet, dear Heaven! what was there to explain?

CHAPTER VII.

IL FAUT PARTIR!

THE sunny days went on unbroken, and fields of hyacinth and narcissus breathed forth their sweetness into the air.

The rocky deserted coast offered numberless sheltered nooks where one could sit and watch the long waves rolling in. What a joy they were, those waves, each forming in turn a great translucent arc, perfect in form and colour, its white crest reflected in its bosom. Yet the joy was no less keen when the waves died down, and the little boat rocked invitingly at anchor. The woods, too, that clothed the hills were full of an infinite solitude that called for hearts to feel it; and the world seemed very young.

Three weeks had passed since that moonlight meeting in the garden, and the face of both boy and girl had gained a new meaning and comeliness. There was a suggestion of virility even in the slight furrow of pain that marked the boy's face in repose.

The furrow had vanished now, however, as he stood in the garden looking up to the bright face at the window.

"I can't possibly play to-day," Vera was saying. "Father has gone to Toulon to hear somebody read a paper, Madame is marketing, and I am cooking

the dinner." A spotless mob-cap and apron bore doubtful witness to the truth of the assertion.

"Mayn't I come and help you?"

"Well—I don't know—are you competent?"

"Rather. I am a don at toffee, and I have toasted sausages in my time."

"Can you stuff a neck of veal?"

"What with? Cotton wool?"

"How nasty you doctors are!" She disappeared from the window, and Giles presently found her, perched idly on the edge of the table in the exquisite French kitchen.

"You seem to me," he said gravely, "to be working too hard."

"Of course I can't begin till Madame comes back; but I do cook beautifully." A very pretty flush coloured her petal-like face. "If you come to supper to-night you shall have a *menu* cooked all by myself."

"And what will your father say?"

"He'll be delighted to see you of course, and besides"—the flush deepened—"I *don't think* he'll be back."

Giles felt his heart thumping like a sledge-hammer. "Done!" he said. "I'll come."

She sprang to her feet, clapping her hands like a child. "Then be off, be off!" she cried. "You little know what it means to create a *menu!* I must forth to the arbour and await the divine afflatus."

. . . .

It was afternoon—airless, dreary.

Giles sat in his room, looking fixedly before him.

"Now," he muttered between his set teeth, "now, now is the time to turn back."

But, oh, dear! it was hard to turn back! All his life up till now had been such a poor little colourless thing.

What had God made a beautiful bright world for, if He did not mean His creatures to live and enjoy? The woods and the sea, and the flowers and the sunshine,—how good they all were!—but what would they be without Vera?

A business-like rap sounded on the door. "Letters, sir!" said Gustave cheerfully.

The misguided wretch spoke as if letters were a thing to be desired. Letters from home! Was it possible that one had ever counted the hours till they should come?

There were two to-day. Giles shivered as he glanced at the handwriting, and tossed them into a drawer unopened. They were not the first that had suffered that fate.

Then again he sat down and buried his face in his arms. "Now," he groaned, "*now* is the time to turn back." Of course he tried to pray; but prayer seemed such a rusty, obsolete weapon in conflict with this new foe. "Oh, God, I have striven to live uprightly and honestly,—why has this come upon me?"

Did no voice come from heaven to say, "*Because* thou hast striven uprightly and honestly, *therefore* I call thee to a harder fight?" If the voice spoke, Giles did not hear. He wanted Vera.

And the time had come to give Vera up. Their pretty idyllic friendship must cease. What would she say when he broke it to her? If only he had told her at once that he was engaged to be married! And yet, God forgive him, how glad he was that he had not!

Of course there was another way out of the difficulty. Giles had thought it over and over till his mind felt threadbare. He could break the old tie——

Why not? The writing-paper lay within reach of his hand. He had only to take up a pen and state in a few brief words that he had changed his mind. True, his last letter had been full of affectionate regard, of bright plans for the future; but what of that? A girl's heart would be broken, of course,—one more—the heart of a girl whom he honestly believed to be the ideal of a Christian man's wife. He knew her mind and heart so well,—her pretty aspiration to be a help meet for her husband.

> "Knowing naught of evil-doing,
> Knowing much of good, dear eyes."

Their whole social circle had been so pleased to hear of their engagement. He never could settle down in Edinburgh if he broke it off. And to settle elsewhere than in Edinburgh meant professional suicide. He was not one of the men who must laboriously build up an ill-paying practice. The eye of his chiefs was upon him; he had only to take advantage of each opportunity that was put in his way.

It was the girl he thought of first, however. How she loved him! How happy they had been in their long walks and talks together! The Granton breakwater, St Anthony's Well, Rest and be Thankful,—each one was pregnant with associations, each one would recall her name for evermore. Happy? Yes; it was true. He had called that happiness in those days. She called it happiness still.

But Vera was happy too, and what a flower on the tree of happiness she was! Only seventeen, a mere child,—her heart was opening for the first time, and she felt as sure of him and his love—as other girls felt of God.

He had meant to lead her to God, and this was how it had ended.

Ended? Would to Heaven it had ended! The last chapter had still to be written, and the pen had been placed in his hand. Giles was still young enough to think that the Fates allow us to close a book and begin all over again.

"Let me get this difficulty over somehow," says youth, "that I may play the game of life well"; and our hair is growing grey before we learn that the difficulty *is* the game.

The situation was not new. Giles was quite aware of that. He had heard and read of it often; but who could ever have guessed that it would have befallen him? And now, whatever he might do, deny himself as he would, he had acted badly still.

Well, something must be done. Nay, more, the right thing must be done. He had given his word, and from that there was no going back. He would keep his engagement with Vera this evening, and he would say goodbye. Alack! How often in the last fortnight he had vowed to say goodbye! Could he trust himself again? Would it not be better to leave now--an hour hence—and write what he dared not rely on himself to say?

A few minutes later he rose to ring the bell. The furrow on his brow was very deep, and his curly hair seemed almost dank.

"*Demandez ma note,*" he said laconically. "*Il faut partir.*"

It is such a simple phrase; the merest tyro can learn it,—*il faut partir.*

CHAPTER VIII.

WAITING.

At last everything was ready. Vera was an apt pupil, and she had not forgotten her mother's little dinners in the olden days. Her clever fingers had twisted coloured paper into quaint floral candle-shades, and the quiet glow of light was very grateful to the eye. It gave the little room an air almost of luxury, and the simple flowers took on a new exotic bloom. Undoubtedly the table was a success.

Of course she must wear the white silk gown Giles liked so well, and those starry white flowers in her hair. "No other woman on earth could wear a wreath like that," he had said. "There is magnetism in those wavy curls of yours." And then he had pretended that his fingers were caught, and that he could not get away.

Ah, what happy times they had had! And to-night should be the best of all. Unless her father came. And if he came, what then? They were not afraid. They had only to tell him that they loved each other.

"Oh, Giles, I do love you, I do love you!" Vera murmured softly, stretching out her beautiful arms as if he were near. "I am so glad you love me!"

She twisted the wreath more carefully than before, but the flowers were wayward to-day; they did not

cling to each other like live things, and her hair seemed to have lost its magnetic charm. Three times she adjusted the wreath, and then, fancying that it had lost half its freshness, she fastened the ends with a tiny knot of ribbon.

Never mind: Giles would look at her face first; and her face was the same as ever. Nay, unless her glass was a gross deceiver, her face had never looked quite as it did to-night. "Oh, you bad girl!" she cried to the radiant image, "I did not mean you to fall in love for ever so long, not for ever, *ever* so long."

In sudden anxiety she sped back to the kitchen.

"Madame," she cried, "you are sure the *vol-au-vent* is all right?"

Madame had never seen a *vol-au-vent* of greater promise.

"And the chestnut soup?"

C'était une purée superbe!

Madame's kindly face beamed. Bless their young hearts! If they had not settled matters already, everything would certainly come right this evening.

But it might be just as well if *monsieur le père* did not come home till to-morrow.

Five minutes past seven. Giles was late. Vera had never known him keep her waiting before, and she wondered whether she ought to stand on her dignity when he came. Ah, there was a ring at the bell; she would put the clock back ten minutes, and pretend he was in time. With great self-restraint she allowed Madame to open the door. She seated herself in a low chair by the glowing logs,—such a picture of radiant welcome as any man might have coveted.

But it was not the step of a man that came across the hall. Madame entered alone, looking rather dis-

turbed, with a letter in her hand. "The boy from the hotel brought it," she said. "He would not wait for an answer."

Not even the ruddy light in the room could conceal Vera's change of countenance. "I suppose Dr Willoughby has been detained," she stammered. "Keep supper warm, Madame. We will wait."

The old woman lingered in the hope of news more definite, but Vera was trembling like a leaf, and dared not open the letter till she found herself alone. Then she tore it from its cover.

"My dear little Vera,

"I don't know how to tell you that I am obliged to leave St Vincent at once. I have letters from home that make it imperative for me to go. I can't tell you how it grieves me to part from you like this. We have had such happy times together, and have been such excellent chums.

"Your friend,

"Giles Willoughby."

It was not the first letter of its kind that has been written, and perhaps it was not the worst. If Giles had consulted a Complete Letter Writer, he might possibly have discovered what *is* the right thing to say under the circumstances; but the situation is undeniably a difficult one, and a man must be dowered with something more than tact if he is to adapt himself gracefully to its exigencies. It is not even as if the recipient could regard the letter calmly, as a philosophical production, from a disinterested point of view. However much she may have been to blame, however reasonable the man's attitude may be, the explanation

is bound to strike her with a certain sense of inadequacy,—when regarded in the light of the past. The woman of the world, of course, will see in a moment that, brief as the missive is, it might have been briefer; her mind makes straight for the irreducible minimum, and she faces it as best she may. But poor little heathen Vera was only a child. Her letter was not one of many. It represented for the moment the whole mystery of life. What did it mean? *Where was Giles?*

Without pausing for a moment to think of her dignity, she rushed out into the night. The messenger could not have gone very far: she must hear from him exactly what had happened. She knew Giles loved her: the idea that he could have wished to leave her never so much as crossed her mind.

Madame, all on the alert, hurried from the kitchen to find a draught of cold air blowing through the house; in another moment the candle-shades might have been on fire. Poor little candle-shades, how gay they looked! Was it possible that any man alive had turned his back on such a welcome?

Hastening to the hall door, she raised her quavering voice,—"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle!" But the moon smiled serenely down, and only the rustle of the palm-trees made answer. Frantic with anxiety, she wrapped herself in a shawl, and took another over her arm. "Mademoiselle Véra!" she called. Madame's husband was at the *cabaret* a mile and a half away. How he did waste time at that *cabaret!* "Véra, Véra!"

Yet she shrieked aloud with fear when, turning suddenly, she saw Vera at her elbow, looking very white and strange in the moonlight. The girl did not seem

to have heard the constant repetition of her name. "Dr Willoughby has been called away," she said. "He must be in great trouble. No doubt I shall hear more to-morrow."

"Mademoiselle will have a morsel of supper?"

"No; but keep it warm. My father may come."

Returning to the sitting-room, she perused the letter once more, squeezing, as it were, every word, as if to extract from it a subtle meaning. She noted that there was no hint in it of trouble at home, no suggestion of a meeting in the future. "Obliged," "imperative," but why?—why? Vera did not much believe in obligations and imperatives. She had taken very kindly to Bentham's dictum, that, "if the use of the word 'ought' be admissible at all, it '*ought*' to be banished from the vocabulary of morals."

"Excellent chums." So they were. But were they nothing more? "Your friend." Truly; but other men had been her friends, and between Giles and all other men stretched an infinity of space. As easy to traverse that space as to roll back the wheels of time and be a child again. The glory of the last few weeks threw her whole earlier life into a faint hazy distance. Go back there? Impossible!

She laughed a sudden strained little laugh. How ridiculous to talk of going back! What would Giles say to that? A thousand proofs of his love came crowding into her mind. She thought of how they had sat together on the beach, his strong arm protecting her shoulders from the sharp points in the rock;—of how he had lifted her high in the air that she might pluck the coral-pink berries from the trees;—of how they had become as little children, only so much nicer and happier than real children ever are!

Oh, if the door would open now, and he would come in, and take her in his arms again! How good they were, those arms, what a haven of rest!

Of course there was no thought of going back. He would come to-morrow, and life would begin again. It was the night she dreaded. How was she to live through the intolerable suspense and uncertainty of this one night? It would have been so easy for him to have given one tiny word of explanation, to say once more, "I love you, Vera." She knew his letter by heart now, but she read it yet again, in the hope that some word might have escaped her eager eye.

The fire was falling low, and she shivered with a sudden sense of chill. Was it possible that *he* had written this letter—he—the man who out of all the rest of the world belonged to her?

In an agony of fear she threw herself on the couch, and the wreath fell unnoticed on the floor.

"Giles!" she cried aloud. "Come back, come back! *I can not bear it.*"

CHAPTER IX.

THE NIGHT.

IGNORANCE of the language, Dr Martineau pointed out long ago, is a great preservative against the wiles of German philosophy; ignorance of the language is also a mighty help in the avoidance of difficult explanations. Many a time in the course of that afternoon Giles cursed the unwieldy weapon he found in the French tongue, but on the whole he came off better than if he had been in a position to make a complete explanation. He referred to his "*lettres*" (which he had not yet opened) and simply reiterated that he must go.

The landlady was much concerned. "Monsieur returns to England?" she asked kindly. To which Giles, after vainly striving to recall the future tense of *savoir*, replied darkly, "*Je sais demain.*"

He managed to impress upon the coachman, however, that he must catch that train, and the good old Rosinante started off at a very respectable pace, leaving the gossips in eagei colloquy as to what could have happened.

Was it within the bounds of possibility that *la petite anglaise* might have refused him?

No; that was the one explanation that was not possible.

The drive to the station was a long one, but friendly

officials hastened to do the bidding of this massive creature, the depth of whose purse was presumably in inverse proportion to that of his linguistic attainments; and with much bustle and shouting, Giles was ushered into the carriage a few minutes before the train was timed to start.

His fellow-passengers looked at him with interest, but probably not one had the faintest suspicion of the fever that raged in his veins. He felt as if he should suffocate. At length, as the faintest premonitory movement of the engine was felt, he lifted his heavy valise as if it had been a match-box, and stepped back on to the platform. "*J'ai oublié quelque chose,*" he informed a grandmotherly guard, and with that oracular remark he hastened up the platform, through the great waiting-room, and out into the open air.

A number of heads turned to look after him. "He is certainly mad," said some one.

And assuredly he felt mad at that moment. His brain throbbed as though it would burst. The folly of his flight seemed boundless. He had been telling himself that now was the time to turn back, not realizing in his madness that now was already too late.

Poor, poor little Vera, with her pretty supper cooked all for him! What a heartless villain he had been! "One of the few that Nature turns out at first hand." Yes, that she was. Men had differed over the value of most things, but which of them, save himself, had turned his back on a woman like this? To think that the Fates had given him one very good thing, and that he had thrown it churlishly back in their teeth!

There were other claims, of course,—far-off secondary claims. To-morrow, in cool blood, he could deal with them. To-night he cared for one thing only. He

could have sobbed with rage against himself when he thought of that brutal letter. She must have got it by now; and how could she guess that it contained merely the negative of all the things he had wanted to say? How had she taken it? What had she done—wild creature of impulse as she was? He knew she was capable of anything in a moment of frenzy, and the thought of the moonlight on the waves came over him with a sinking of heart that was horrible.

She had loved him so royally—him only in all her young life—not as girls love now-a-days, but with infinite coquetry and *abandon*, like the heroines of old.

If only God would keep her safe till he got back, he could manage the rest.

Half-mechanically, in the course of his thoughts, he had tossed his valise on to the box of a fiacre, had given the address, and held out a piece of gold in his hand. They were crawling along the highroad now, crawling so slowly, though the driver's whip went unceasingly and the horse dripped with sweat.

"Wait for me, Vera. I am coming, darling. Wait, wait!" Actually a great hot tear had fallen on his hand, and the lump in his throat was almost unbearable. "It will be all right, sweetheart. Only a few minutes more!"

At length they reached the house. Giles had to be reminded of the fare that lay ready in his tightly clenched hand; then he sped through the garden and into the silent house. He had forgotten the possibility that the Father might be at home.

Vera's cry of despair had just rung out,—"Giles, come back, come back! *I can not bear it.*" She lay on the sofa in the ruddy light, her beautiful head like a drooping flower on her outstretched arms. Unwittingly

Giles trod on the wreath that had fallen from her dusky hair.

"Vera?" he said. "Thank God, thank God!"

She lifted her eyes as if from the sleep of death, so full of wonder, of infinite rest and content.

"*Giles!*" she said.

They were together again. That was all they knew. Every other thought dropped away, and left them there alone.

Alas, poor Giles, with his triple steel!

Alas, poor little witch, what will your witchcraft avail you now?

CHAPTER X.

THE MORROW.

AH, yes, the morrow,—we all know it has to come, with its absence of trappings and pageantry, its sense of anticlimax and reaction. Last night the limelight was thrown on one particular point in life, and all else lay in shadow. To-day the light is switched off, and our attention is claimed by a dreary stretch of sordid and insistent details. Before we are quite awake we remember the little word spoken as it were by chance, the act that was scarcely an act, so completely was it thrust on us by the great ground-swell of life. "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die!" Misleading philosophy! Let us eat and drink, but to-morrow we must live and assimilate the feast as best we may. The word that perchance we are loath to acknowledge—the act for which in our inmost heart we scarcely feel responsible—has become a part of ourselves for evermore. We must stand by it, defend it, build the superstructure of life upon it. Blot out or erase it we never may.

And therein lies the skill of the game.

There may be something almost ludicrous about the morrow—from the outsider's point of view; but that is an aspect of the case that seldom appeals till later to the main actors in the drama.

For the first time in a number of weeks the sun was

obscured by clouds, and a chilly haar blew over from the east. Most of the guests at the hotel had retired to the shelter of the salon, but the golden-haired lady sat as usual in her alcove near the door of the verandah. She was comfortably discussing a dish of *bouille-à-baisse*, when the door opened and two visitors entered.

The elder was a well-marked type of chaperon,—grim, lean, and business-like; the younger was equally typical, in a very different way, a fine, tall, breezy, fair-haired English girl. There was something just a little masculine in the half-defiant stride with which she traversed the verandah, but, when she spoke, her voice shook as if with anxiety or nervousness.

Dr Willoughby—was he here?

The landlady's gracious face stiffened into a mask without losing its smile of welcome. Strange rumours had reached her concerning the events of the night before, and an exhausted horse had spent the night in her stable; she must feel her way carefully, and not commit that handsome young Englishman, until she had found out whether this was friend or foe.

Dr Willoughby had left yesterday. Was he perhaps a friend of Mademoiselle's?

He was Mademoiselle's brother. Was he well?

Oh, very well.

Did Madame know where he had gone?

With great *aplomb* the landlady contrived to talk for a minute or two without committing herself to an answer. To the superior English mind she gave the impression of being a feeble and garrulous Frenchwoman, but all the time her brain was working at high pressure. The girl looked good and honest, but goodness and honesty are awkward virtues sometimes. Madame was one of those women whose unfailing

instinct it is to side with the man; and, besides, the girl was a stranger: poor Monsieur was an old friend.

At last her course was taken.

Unfortunately she did not know where Monsieur had gone; but he had made several friendships in the neighbourhood—with men of science; she would send to the house of one of these and enquire. The house was far off, and of course the savant might not be at home when the messenger arrived. In the meantime Mademoiselle might assure herself that her brother was in excellent health. What a handsome man he was! and how striking the resemblance to his sister! Would the ladies not be seated and have some lunch?

To her great relief the weary women consented gladly, and she retired to the bureau to discuss the position with her husband. The conference was soon joined by the naval officer and the golden-haired lady, both of whom, as more or less permanent residents, took a keen human interest in all that went on. And this was no ordinary matter. How rare after all in daily life is a real bit of scandal, that requires no invention nor exaggeration to help it out!

"My own belief is," said the landlady, "that Monsieur has taken a room in the village."

"Then say so," advised the other lady. "After all, she is his sister; and he is not half a man if he cannot defend himself. As for *la petite anglaise*, she is a match for half-a-dozen of these gauche girls. I don't believe she is only the age she pretends to be. Do you, Monsieur?"

Upon which the naval officer shrugged his broad shoulders with an oracular smile.

It was finally decided, however, by a majority of

three to one, that, in view of the delicacy of the situation, the landlady herself should drive to Mr Carruthers' villa, and enquire where Giles was to be found. The committee granted her full powers to deal with the situation as her motherly heart and *savoir vivre* might dictate, only stipulating tacitly that she should bring back a piquant story.

But a considerable amount of machinery had to be set in motion before Madame went abroad. Within the precincts of the hotel she usually appeared in mufti; when she issued beyond its portals she must needs be *tirée à quatre épingles.* Complexion, hair, costume had to undergo a radical transformation, and of course all this took time.

So it came about that Miss Willoughby's patience was tried before the fiacre set out; in another quarter of an hour it was worn to the merest shred. With hasty steps and unseeing eyes she explored the environs of the hotel, and finally returned to her chaperon in a state of intense nervous agitation.

"What can keep her so long?" she exclaimed. "I don't trust that woman. Let us walk up to the highroad, and see if her fiacre is in sight."

The day, though grey, had become sultry and depressing. Not a leaf stirred. At this mid-day hour the highroad was absolutely deserted. But looking up towards the hills, Miss Willoughby saw a great tweeded figure emerge from the wood and come striding across the fields.

"I believe that is Giles!" she cried.

The young man looked as if he had come through a long campaign. He was hot and wayworn; his face seemed ten years older than when he had parted from his sister a few weeks before.

"*Maud!*" he said.

Sisters have received strange welcomes before now, but seldom so strange a one as this. His brow positively lowered over those frank blue eyes of which they had all been so proud. Then his lips thinned out to the merest line. "What the *dickens* brings you here?"

"Giles," she said, striving to conceal her alarm, "what is wrong?"

He kicked a clod of earth impetuously out of the path. "Wrong? Nothing's wrong. What on earth should be wrong?"

"You haven't written. You haven't answered our letters for ever so long."

"And you mean to say that, because I missed a post or two, you have come all this way to look me up, as if I were a three-year-old? *You—alone?*"

"No, no, not alone." She turned to look for the chaperon, who was keeping discreetly in the rear. "This is Miss Brown, Lulie's new governess."

Ah, yes; there may be something ludicrous about the morrow. The irate father, the outraged mother,—we have grown used to these in the *rôle* of avenger; but Miss Brown, Lulie's new governess! There was a commonplaceness,—an absurdity about the matter that made Giles feel as if the tragedy must be a dream. It had always turned out to be a dream before.

Ah! He shuddered. No, no. This was no dream. It was real, and it was there for ever.

He lifted his cap with exaggerated politeness. "I ought to feel honoured, I am sure," he said bitterly.

Trembling, Maud laid her hand on his coat-sleeve. "Giles," she said, "what has come to you? Don't you care about Father?"

"About Father?"

"Yes. Haven't you had our letters?" Her voice broke into a sob. "He is dreadfully ill; the doctors say he may not live. We wrote and wrote, and then wired, but there was no answer. You must come home, Giles, and save him to us."

"Wired? I got no telegram." But, as he spoke, Giles remembered an insignificant grey-blue envelope which he had found with his letters one night at dusk, and had tossed into the drawer.

"You might just walk on to the inn, Miss Brown, and tell Madame I have met my brother. Giles, dear, tell me all about it. We have gone through such a time of strain at home, and I see that you have been ill too."

"I am perfectly well. When a man goes abroad, and knocks about, it is the act of an idiot to complain if his letters don't come in with the milk every morning. But what is it about the governor? Who have you called in?—and what did they say?"

"He had a stroke ten days ago, and another just before I left."

The young man's interest was thoroughly roused now. He poured forth a torrent of questions which she answered as best she might.

"What do you think?" she faltered at last. "Is there any hope?"

His face was very grave. "I don't know."

"You will come home with us to-night?"

"Of course," he answered irritably. His brain was in a whirl. He was trying to think how this terrible news would affect his own affairs. "I must make a few arrangements first. You had better go back to the hotel, and I will call for you in time for the night express."

He must see Vera again. That was certain. It would be too absurd to send another letter of farewell. The wolf was very real now, but unfortunately he had discounted the value of that excuse. No one,—not even Vera—could have blamed him for going home to a dying father,—if only he had opened those letters before. It seemed now the merest chance that he had not done so,—how cruel that a good man's life should be at the mercy of such chances!

CHAPTER XI.

SUNDAY IN EDINBURGH.

It was Sunday afternoon in Edinburgh, and the rain was falling in torrents. Giles sat by the drawing-room window, looking out over the sodden, deserted links. He had only been at home three days, but the three days seemed an eternity. Already it had become difficult to think of his father as the busy man of affairs he had known so long: had he not always been the poor motionless invalid that lay in the bedroom below? The great specialist had said that there might be an early and fatal recurrence of the cerebral hæmorrhage; but Giles knew better. His father would go on like this forever, and the rain would go on, and this black, gnawing depression. Giles had ceased for the moment to strive or cry, to weigh conflicting claims: he felt like one bound hand and foot, as helpless as that poor thing downstairs. He had gone to church that morning, and everyone had received him so warmly, just as if he were the same man who had sat in the comfortable family pew six weeks before. One lady had enquired whether he had found congenial means of grace abroad! If only he could laugh—one great soul-delivering laugh—at the mighty joke of life! Lots of fellows would take it like that. But the blood of Covenanting ancestors ran in the Willoughby veins, and Giles could not

get comfort even for a moment from the thought that it was a joke. Nay,—he would not have owned to the feeling for worlds—but beyond all doubt the one thing that made life possible just now was this opportune illness of his father's. It gave one time to reflect: it accounted for one's wretchedness and gloom; and besides, the penetrating glance of those shrewd, virtuous eyes would have been unbearable.

The door opened softly, as doors open in a house where illness has become an established thing. "Giles, dear," said a sisterly voice, "the nurse says there is no reason at all why you should stay in this afternoon."

The young man glanced out of the window. "I can well believe that she doesn't care to go out."

"Perhaps she has no such attraction as you have."

Giles checked the expression that rose to his lips; but he did not look as if the attraction was irresistible.

His sister—a younger sister than Maud and a gentler —pretended to rearrange the books on the table. "It is only a step," she said, striving to speak casually. "You never missed a Sunday before, unless you were ill or away from home; and Alice has been counting the days."

"All right; all right. Trot along, there's a good girl. Perhaps I'll go by-and-by."

When the door closed, he laid his head on his arm with a sigh that was almost a sob. He did so want to be good to his sisters just now,—to fulfil their expectations of him; and he couldn't, he simply couldn't.

Alice was counting the days, and Vera was counting the days, and there was only one Giles. It was absurd, it was ridiculous, to suppose that he who sat in this severe family drawing-room, was the same being who

had roamed with Vera in the woods. If he could only cut himself in two, what a good man each would be! It was not Jekyll and Hyde at all. Both would be good. Vera was no temptress; she was simply a child of nature, and his very own. How royally she had risen out of her own personality when he had told her of his father's illness! "Why, go, dear, go," she had said, almost pushing him from the room. And, when he was actually going, how her eyes had shone with unshed tears as she laid that wonderful head on his shoulder. "Don't have it in your mind the least little bit that you must hurry back," she had said; "but write often, often, just one tiny line to say I am safe in your heart."

Oh, now, by all the gods, what man would forsake a woman like that? Giles took a sheet of paper and began to write.

A moment later he raised his head with a scowl.

"Giles, dear, here is Alice. She came to enquire after Father. She was afraid, if you went out, the rain might start your cough again."

His sister slipped out of the room, and left them alone together.

"Giles! It is like sunshine to see you again!"

It came upon Giles with a strange sense of surprise that Alice was still the same. He had known, of course, that it would be so, and yet he was surprised. The weeks that had brought a ferment into his life had left her untouched, and her stability affected him in a way that he had not foreseen. It carried on the tradition of the past, and swept him with it. The smooth brown hair, the innocent blue eyes, the sweet serenity of the forehead, brought back a crowd of memories that was overwhelming. He had forgotten

how intimate, how real, the relation between them had been; in a moment it seemed to fill the room, to crowd out everything else. What could he do but take her in his arms? Was she not his promised wife? For the moment, at least, he must drop into the old groove—until he had time to think.

Every day Alice had rehearsed this meeting, and thought of all they would have to say to each other. She had saved up such a crowd of little experiences to tell him; but now they seemed to have grown so pitifully small that she checked herself and stammered, and wondered that he did not ask her to explain this strange new timidity. At last the silence was so deep and long that she became uneasy. Giles seemed to have forgotten her presence, and the furrow on his brow alarmed her.

"Is there anything the matter, dear?"

He roused himself with a start from a reverie.

"No. What should be the matter? At least, that is to say, of course I am awfully cut up about the Pater."

She stroked his hand half shyly. "Don't try to keep it to yourself, dear. Share it with me."

He stared. His mind was so full of the real trouble that for a moment he thought she meant him to share that.

"I don't know that it helps one to talk about things," he said. "Men are different from women in those ways, I suppose. There *is* nothing to be said. We have just got to wait,—and bear," he added, feeling that something more than waiting was expected of a Christian man.

"Do you know—I have such an odd feeling about you, Giles?"

He looked almost frightened. "Have you?" he said with a nervous laugh. "What is that?"

"I feel as if you had grown so much older, so far away from poor little me. I feel as if all your medical studies hadn't made you so wise as these few weeks you have spent abroad."

He laughed again with real relief. "One has to give up being a boy some time, hasn't one?" he said kindly.

"Yes, oh, yes. You have grown so manly, Giles; but"—she hesitated—"you were a very nice boy."

It was a comfort when Maud entered the room a few minutes later. "Father seems to want something," she said, "and we can't make out what it is. We think perhaps he wants you."

Giles sprang to his feet and left the room. As he passed the table at which he had been writing, he unwittingly brushed a sheet of blotting-paper on to the floor. Slowly and absently Alice picked it up, and as she returned it to its place, her eye fell on a letter just begun,—

"*My own little Vera*—"

And Alice had seen that handwriting so often before.

When Giles reached the sick-room his father had sunk into an uneasy doze. The young man waited a quarter of an hour, but there was nothing to be done, so he returned to the drawing-room. Alice had gone. That was a relief, but he wished now that he had been a little kinder to her. What was he doing when she came? Oh, to be sure, he was writing to Vera. What a mercy that he had had presence of mind to cover up the letter! He tore the sheet across, threw it into the fire, and gave himself up to that mood of

aimless drifting dreariness which most of us know too well.

When it drew near church time, he left the house, but it was not towards the church that he bent his steps. For an hour or more he tramped about the wet lamplit streets, and then he felt that he could bear his own company no longer. But to whom should he go? He was in no mood for confession or pious talk: he wanted something healthily human. Was there any chance that Jack Dalzell might be at home? He would do. An honest man and a clean-minded, but one who never entered a church, and who talked about Art as if it were a far higher thing than religion. Perhaps after all he had been taking a morbid view of the situation; in any case he felt a sudden hunger for Dalzell's healthy pagan conversation.

Dalzell was poor and lived up a long "common stair." A knot of young men were loafing in the doorway, and Giles, as he passed, overheard a remark that filled him with loathing. Here indeed was an atmosphere that was not distinctively Christian. Had he taken the first step towards *this?*

Dalzell's room was stuffy and full of smoke, but the grasp of Dalzell's big hand was a thing to warm the heart.

"Well, by Jove! Willoughby on the Sabbath, and"—he looked at an old-fashioned silver watch—"before the kirk has skailed! Sit down, old man, sit down. So you left the ninety-and-nine in the wilderness and came after the lost sheep? Upon my soul, it's almost enough to make a man believe in a God!"

He installed his visitor in a worn horse-hair arm-chair, and seated himself opposite. Shall we light up? That's right. I had an idea that you had forsworn

the divine weed. I can't talk except through a halo of smoke, and I mean to talk to-night."

"That's right. That's what I have come for."

And then, of course, a long silence fell on both.

It was Dalzell who broke it. "Do you remember, Willoughby," he said, "some nine months ago, talking to me about my soul?"

Giles winced. This was not the sort of conversation he had come in search of.

"Well?" he said drily.

"No doubt you thought at the time you had got the worst of the encounter; but I thought it uncommon plucky of you."

He paused, but no encouragement to proceed came from the big arm-chair opposite.

"You see—I have often chaffed you before your face, and behind your back, but I always knew you walked straight, Willoughby. *That is the sort of thing that tells.*"

Dead silence.

"I thought it uncommon plucky of you, as I say; but it is a nice question, this speaking to people about their souls. Some folks think it a liberty. Perhaps in my dour and hielant fashion I gave you to understand that I did. Well, I didn't. I thought you were one of the few men in the University who were entitled to speak."

How Willoughby's heart would have leapt at the words—two months ago!

"But there's just this awkward thing about carrying the war into the enemy's country—that you have got to consider how you can get out again. Wasn't it Napoleon who said he saw fifty ways of entering England, but he didn't see one way of getting out? If once you intrude upon a man's spiritual privacy, he is entitled to

make you share it for all the rest of his days. You're in that big chair, are you, Willoughby? My landlady's father went straight to Heaven from that chair; straight as a die, without a call on the way. Yes, there you are —at my mercy; and there you shall remain till you have answered my questions. They're brief; but"—he drew a long breath, and puffed violently for a minute or two—"by Jove, they're pointed!"

Another long silence fell on the room, and when Dalzell went on, it was in a quiet narrative tone.

"It is a number of years since I took much stock in the miraculous. In fact, to make things clear, I may as well say with Carlyle, that it is as plain as mathematics that these things never happened. I don't know that I believe in sin, but—I chose my forebears badly, and began life awry with a puritan upbringing. Well, the fact is I have got into a hole, and although I don't believe in sin, I have been forced of late to believe in temptation. 'Oh, wretched man that I am'—he knew a thing or two, Paul did. Well, what I want to hear from you, Willoughby, is this: Is this religion of yours which you tried to foist on your unworthy friend,—is it any help against imminent temptation? *Imminent*, mind; not temptation to pride and vainglory, and the things you can reflect upon calmly in your arm-chair; but imminent—the enemy thundering at the crazy door and all that business. Now, on soul and conscience,—is it any help then?"

Giles struggled vainly for a second or two against the huskiness of his voice. "I am sure it ought to be," he said. "'God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.'"

Dalzell's lip curled. "Oh, it's all in print, right enough," he said. "I could have told *you* that. What I want is to see it written in some man's blood. I am brutally personal, no doubt; but it was you who began it. Now be honest. You have not lived even to your age without knowing what temptation means. Did *you* find a way of escape?"

"Sometimes."

"But when the real thing—the big thing came?"

Did the man mean to sift his inmost soul? Giles moved uneasily in his chair, and when he spoke it was almost irritably.

"There are many better Christians than I am," he began.

"Then the game's up,—that's all I can say. If I have got to be a better man than you before I even begin to get any help,—well, the offer is not good enough."

"Don't say that, Dalzell!" Giles exclaimed eagerly. "There is—I am sure there is—a way of escape. Why don't you go and talk to Dr Grey about it? He is so much wiser and better than I am."

"Ay, no doubt; and older and richer, and comfortably settled with a nice wife and children. I don't know that his case would be any criterion for a poor young devil like me. It was *your* experience I wanted."

Willoughby's heart sank within him. If only this conversation had occurred two months ago, how beautifully, how inspiringly, he would have spoken! Even a week hence, everything might be settled somehow; but the occasion had arisen just in the moment when his tongue was tied. His nerves were sorely tried by the closeness of the room, and by Dalzell's extraordinary attack. He was half tempted to cry out in sensational

fashion, "Dalzell, Dalzell,—God be merciful to me a sinner!" but it seemed incredible just then that this was the right thing to do. He still seemed to himself mainly the victim of an accident which might yet be put right by another accident. It was not really he who had taken that one false step. Would it not be better for the sake of religion—for God's sake—to ignore the slip?—to act as though it had never been?—to answer the question as he would have answered it two months ago?

He cleared his throat. "You must not mistake me, Dalzell," he said. "A man does not boast of these things. I have found a way of escape once and again."

Dalzell laid down his pipe and looked across wistfully at his companion. "I don't think I mistake you, lad," he said. "You might have said, 'Nay, I have been beaten,' in a tone that would have meant victory through and through. It was the ring of your voice I looked to. But don't worry, lad, don't worry. It's just what I expected. I asked too much. Have a drop of whisky and water?"

When Giles reached home, he went straight up to his room and flung himself on the bed. The numbness was gone now,—driven away by a raging remorse that was almost more than he could bear.

Yes, Dalzell was right. He had been a good man—better than he had realized till now—when it was too late. "One of the few fellows in the University who are entitled to speak." He felt almost savage with Dalzell for not telling him all this before. Now it was past—irrevocably past as it seemed. Even Dalzell, the pagan, would call him a sinner now—

if not a cad. As he thought of the claims that two women had upon him, Giles tingled with a sense of shame that seemed as though it would drive him mad. He would do anything, anything, to expiate his folly. If only a sublime act of chivalry would put things right, how cheerfully he would do it. Nay, what torture would he not undergo, if, by undergoing it, he could regain his lost estate? But there was no regaining it. Do what he would, the brand was there. He was still a sinner,—a cad. He felt as if he could have risen to any other difficulty that life might offer, save just the difficulty that actually loomed before him. There was the strength of a giant in his sinews, and nothing for the giant to do.

He opened his window and leaned out, though the rain was cold. How long was it possible for human nature to stand this torment and keep sane?

"The asylum stands on a bright and breezy hill——"

What a bagatelle were the trials and temptations of other men! A bitter flood of self-pity came over him at the thought. Would *any* man have held out under the same stress? Meeting Vera all day and every day—watching her sweet woman's nature open out with a coquetry and seductiveness that no art could have simulated. Who but himself would ever know how overwhelming the temptation had been? And his lips were sealed forever. It was not fair! It was not fair! He *had* been "tempted above that he was able"—above what mankind is able to bear.

"Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned." Dimly across the ages the words came back. Giles might have echoed them a few minutes before. He could not echo them now. If he had sinned against God,

God had failed in His word to him, suffering him to be tempted above that a good man is able to bear.

Then, for the first time, a resentment against Vera rose in his mind. With a bitter smile he recalled that "chalice" of hers, — her father as blind as a mole; her mother, — a French actress! What would her prospects in life have been at the best? Would other men — would Dalzell — have been *slower* than he had been?

Then the frantic remorse again, and so on round and round, till the winter dawn crept in on his sleepless eyes.

CHAPTER XII.

"THE KINGDOMS OF THE WORLD."

MR WILLOUGHBY was dead. Giles was, of course, in the position of "nearest male relative," and, in the midst of his genuine sorrow, it soothed his feelings to find himself treated with all the respect due to the head of the house in circumstances of affliction. His mother was prostrate, and but for Maud he never could have got through the manifold duties of the time. Maud was present at the trying necessary interviews that had to be faced, she remembered who were the people who ought to have special intimation of their loss, she knew just what to say in the notice to the *Times* and to the *Scotsman*, and it was under her auspices that dressmakers had been stealthily coming and going for days past. There were so many details to arrange that the moment for serious reflection went by almost unnoticed. Everything in these days is done to prevent our realizing the simple fact of death.

Under grey February skies the coffin had been lowered into the ground. A great concourse of people had assembled, and many had been the references to young Willoughby's God-fearing life, to his upright and honourable conduct, to the prop and stay his mother and sisters would henceforth find in him.

Then the mourners had been boxed into the grim carriages again, and a few had returned to the house for the reading of the will.

Giles did not follow the document very closely. He had never known what it was to be in more than momentary need of money. He received a vague general impression that his father placed him in a position of responsibility and importance; and that was all.

But the lawyer detained him when the others left the room. "I would like to explain at once, Dr Willoughby," he said, "that I am afraid affairs won't turn out as well as they look on paper. Some of the investments are very doubtful indeed. However, you have had a first-rate education, and that is a fortune in itself."

Giles nodded absently. "Oh, I have no doubt it will be all right," he said. His mind was too full of other cares to make room for this one, and he felt that he ought to be downstairs, fufilling the manifold duties that devolved upon him.

A tall grey-haired man was awaiting him in the hall. "I must hurry off to a consultation, Giles," he said kindly; "but I want to have a good talk with you about the future. Come round to-morrow evening and eat a slice of mutton with me quietly. My wife is confined to her room. I want to hear all about your plans. Life is going to be a serious business for you now."

"Thank you very much, sir. I will."

Giles would fain have refused. There are many Edinburghs, and the Edinburgh of which Professor Harrington was a representative seemed insufferable to the young man just then. Besides, he was in no mood

for a confidential conversation with a man so much older than himself. The gulf of the years had never yawned so widely for him as now. And this man had some sort of right to be frank and personal. He was Alice's uncle, and Giles had been one of his favourite students at the University. However, there was no use postponing what had to come, and five minutes before the dinner-bell rang the following evening, Professor Harrington's butler was ushering young Willoughby, with unusual ceremony, into his master's consulting-room.

It was one of those Edinburgh houses that have "success" written all over them. It contained few heirlooms, but everything in it seemed well fitted to go down to posterity. Dark oak and heavy bronzes, deep-piled carpets, and chairs such as in those days one seldom saw,—every detail attracted the eye till the professor entered the room; then the house and all its trappings became merely a well-chosen setting for the large urbanity of his presence.

"Ah, Willoughby, welcome."

There was a change in the professor's bearing too. He seemed to have laid aside the dominie, and there was a suggestion of camaraderie in his manner that the young man found subtly flattering. The lengthy and doctrinal "grace before meat" recalled former days rather forcibly; but under the gracious influence of the soup and the professor's old sherry, that impression soon passed away. Giles drew a deep breath. He need not have dreaded this interview after all. In the teeth of his expectations, he was finding here what he had vainly sought in Dalzell's eyrie. He had got out of the region of categorical imperatives into a world where the edges of things were just a little

blurred,—pleasantly blurred. After all one need not be always sifting things to their foundations, always ascertaining one's precise latitude and longitude on the chart of life. Why not drift at ease now and then when the sun shone, and the waves rippled softly about the keel? Why not be content to forget?

Dessert was on the table before the conversation turned to anything more serious than idle chit-chat.

"And now, Giles, I am all eagerness to know what the next move is going to be."

Thanks to the steadying influence of the wine, the young man answered lightly: "Oh, a few more posts, I suppose, and then the brass-plate business."

"A few more posts? Why, how many have you had?"

"Only two—Medicine and Surgery. I want to do Eyes and Throats and Insanity. Fevers, perhaps."

The professor moved his glass that the mellow light might fall on his tawny port. "And what is your specialty going to be?"

"I don't know. Surgery, I suppose."

"Surgery is a big word now-a-days, and it grows bigger every day."

"Oh, of course; but I should be content with small beginnings."

"I don't mean that. The successful man of the future must narrow his range, and perfect himself in that."

"What about Fordyce?"

"The last of his race. Edinburgh will never know another like him." The professor raised his glass almost caressingly to his lips. "*And that is as it should be.* He is a curious relic of mediævalism. If public opinion had not been too strong even for him,

he would still be cutting off limbs with red-hot knives, and stopping the bleeding with boiling pitch."

Giles laughed. "I know. He says antiseptics are all rot. Do you know what he did the other day?"—and the conversation branched off into technicalities.

"There is something sublime about him all the same," the young man said at last. "I mean," he added hastily, finding that the remark was not received with effusion, "it's not every fellow who could carry it off as he does."

The professor cleared his throat, and made a slight inclination of the head. "To return to the point, however," he said, "don't you think your plan is rather a fancy one,—involving a frittering of energies? The man who does all the correct things is apt to prove disappointing in practice. Why not settle down to a specialty at once?"

"No, no!" Giles protested hastily. "I am not fit," he added more slowly. "You don't know what an ignoramus I am, sir."

The professor nodded approvingly. "It is right that you should think so, of course," he said. Then, after a pause, "Have you had any conversation with M'Alpine about your—your father's affairs?"

"No—yes—that is to say, he told me some of the investments were rather doubtful."

"I am afraid 'doubtful' is rather a mild word. And you must not forget that you are now the head of your family. You have a mother and three sisters dependent on you, all of whom have been brought up in comfort,—I might almost say, in luxury."

Giles glanced round the harmonious shadows of the room, and brought his eyes back to the radiant circle of light. "No, no, sir, not luxury," he said.

"I might almost say in luxury," repeated the professor. "I had a talk with M'Alpine this afternoon, and I fear at the best your mother will have to narrow her expenses materially. We must consider seriously what is the best thing to do in the interests of all four."

Giles laughed. "I am afraid Maud won't ask our advice," he said. "She would like nothing better than to earn her own living. She loves teaching, and will take her certificate at Shandwick Place in April——"

"Tut, tut, tut. I fear Maud is inclined to be a strong-minded young woman, Giles. You must assert your authority if need be. While you have a pair of capable hands you would not have your sister earning a wage in the open market?"

"No, sir, of course not," said Giles, realizing for the first time that there was a principle involved in the matter.

"I am well aware, of course, that some gentlewomen are forced to such extremities, poor things; but that is the more reason why the bread should not be taken out of their mouths by those who can be provided for by their male relatives. Maud is a nice girl, a nice girl. She will be all right in a few years, but what she wants is to find her master. If it can be arranged, we must make it possible for your sisters to marry well. A woman's function is matrimony."

"No doubt; but I am afraid for the next year or two it will take me all my time to support myself."

"That depends on the use you make of your opportunities. Shall we move into the library? I have a brand of cigars I should like you to try."

A quarter of an hour had passed, and a delicious aroma pervaded the room before the conversation was resumed.

"The fact is, Giles, I am growing an old man. My hand is not so steady as it was. Your father's death should remind us forcibly of the uncertainty of life. I have neither chick nor child, and I confess the wish nearest my heart is to see you and Alice prosperous and happy, taking up our work—my wife's and mine—and following in our steps. My wife tells me Alice has a genuine love for evangelistic work—such quiet, unobtrusive work as beseems a woman, and that she is acquiring a real gift for leading in prayer—at Bible-classes and working-parties. As regards myself, Giles, I have no hesitation in saying that you are the one of all my students whom I would choose to carry on my work."

"It's awfully good of you, I am sure, sir; but——"

"You have a keen brain and a steady hand. I may say without flattery that you have the right manner, pleasant and gracious, with just that touch of authority that is so useful,—especially in dealing with the other sex."

"But, sir, it never crossed my mind——"

The professor held up his hand. "You have always been exemplary in the discharge of your religious duties. In short, Giles, you realized long ago that you are a sinner who has nothing to look to but Christ for his salvation."

Giles wondered how it was possible that he had ever considered such sudden turns in the conversation a desirable and fitting thing.

"But, sir, it never crossed my mind to go in for your specialty."

The professor smiled blandly. "Then suppose you let it cross your mind now. My practice increases daily. It is—in the providence of God—a lucrative practice. Already I am compelled to pass on cases to some one. In fact I may say in confidence, Willoughby, that there are not many men in the country who could offer you such an opening. But I want to see you settled at once,—that is to say, as soon as would be fitting after your poor father's death."

The tinkle of an upstairs bell sounded faintly through the house.

The professor started and looked at the clock.

"Why, bless me, I am forgetting prayers. Just touch the bell, Giles. We will have the servants in here."

With the air of one to whom the proceeding has become mechanical, the butler wheeled a table up to his master's chair, and carefully arranged on it several handsome, well-worn tomes, while an elderly woman placed a few chairs for the servants near the door.

Then there fell on the group a preliminary silence that was almost awful in its dreariness.

Slowly the professor turned the pages of the good book. Then he cleared his voice and began,—

"'*Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.*

"'*But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.*

"'*And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.*

"'*The ungodly are not so, but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.*

"'*Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.*

"'*For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous; but the way of the ungodly shall perish.*'"

The reader dropped a few words of commentary as he went along, and then engaged in prayer. When the servants were dismissed, he took the young man by the hand.

"So that is settled, is it, my boy?" he said.

"It's awfully good of you, I'm sure, sir," stammered Giles. "I never dreamt of such a piece of luck. But—what with my father's death and one thing and another—I would like just to go home and think it all over. I can't tell you how much obliged I am."

The professor saw that his point was gained. "That is only wise and right," he said kindly. "Good-night, Giles. God bless you!"

Giles almost sprang down the steps into the cold night air. He had got away at last, and he had committed himself to nothing, thank Heaven! He was still free as air. But what an offer it was, if only——

Ah, that "if only." It rubbed against a bit of his mind that was galled and raw. Well, at least he had gained time to think. Who knew after all but Vera might forget him,—little butterfly! If nothing came of their—their friendship,—what was she the worse—wild creature of impulse, untamed child of nature that she was! Ay, from her own point of view, what was she the worse? But even as the graceless, audacious thought formed itself in his mind, Giles knew that from *his* point of view she had passed over the line—had become a different being for ever and ever—a

"—— reed which grows nevermore again
As a reed with the reeds in the river."

Then, with a sudden revulsion, there rushed over his mind a sense of the emptiness, the worthlessness of his life here, a longing to "chuck it all"—to cast aside this atmosphere of respectability and prayer, of conventionality—"hypocrisy," he called it—to return to the Bohemian days on the Riviera, alone with Vera.

"He was no fool," said Giles, "who talked of a world well lost for love."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS.

"LULIE, dear, just run upstairs and knock at Giles' door. Tell him his breakfast will be cold, and remind him that Mr M'Alpine is to be here at ten."

The child hesitated. "He'll be so cross," she said.

"Very well; I'll go myself."

With the best intentions in the world, Maud was acting the part of a blister to her brother at this time,—a useful remedy, no doubt, in its proper sphere, but scarcely conducive to the healing of a raw surface.

"Oh, do give him a few minutes more," pleaded Edith. "I expect he has slept badly again."

Maud glanced at the clock. "He must come down," she said, "whether he has slept badly or not. How odd that he should have taken to sleeping badly! Do you remember we used to say he would need an assistant to do the night-work, because his patients would never be able to rouse him?"

"Poor Giles; he has felt this trouble so." Edith's eyes filled with tears.

"Would that make him irritable? He is so changed since he came back. Surely he can't be so foolish as to worry because we shall be poorer than we have been." Then her face clouded. "There is a letter from Alice for him this morning."

A few minutes later Giles entered the room. He rubbed his hands cheerfully, and, in brotherly fashion, tweaked Lulie by the ear in a gallant attempt to be his old self. Then his eye fell on the uppermost of the letters that lay by his plate, and the cloud on his brow settled down more heavily than ever. He was playing with an untasted breakfast when the man of business arrived.

There was nothing dramatic about the family affairs —nothing that is not happening to widows and orphans every day. They must move into a small house: Lulie must give up her private governess and go to a cheap but excellent school: there would be no margin for holidays, nor amusements, nor pretty frocks; as for Gilès—"Whatever money is spent on setting you up in practice, doctor, may be looked upon as a safe investment; but it will have to be drawn from capital, of course."

"Ye-es," said Giles slowly. "Well, it is possible that I may not need to take it. I have not had time to think over my own affairs."

"I am sorry to hear so poor an account of Mrs Willoughby."

"She is dreadfully cut up," said Giles. "I am just going in to see her now."

To his surprise he found his mother sitting up in bed. She held out her arms with a little cry. "My dear boy," she said, "I have just been thinking how ungrateful I am."

He seated himself on the edge of the bed, and put his arm round her rather awkwardly. The Willoughbys as a family had never been given to caresses, and he was surprised and touched when she leaned back on his arm with a little sigh of content.

"I had not realized what a support God has raised up to me in you. I have just had a note from Professor Harrington."

Giles bit his lip. "Harrington is awfully kind, of course," he said; "but I don't know why you should assume that I could not make my way without him."

"Of course you could! Do you think I don't know that? What I did not realize was that you are a man of standing now,—that your way *is made*."

"Oh, as a question of time——"

"That's just it. You see, dear, there is no use in ignoring the fact that for your sisters time is everything. For the little while I shall be here nothing greatly matters to me; I can put up with any hardships; but if your sisters once *drop out—!* You know how it has been with other girls we know, and you would like your father's daughters to have a fair chance. Maud and Edith are just at the age when it would be such a pity for them to break off any ties they may be forming."

"Yes."

"But all fear of that is over now, thank God! You know I am not a worldly woman, but some one must think of these things; and you have taken such a load from my mind."

A few minutes later Giles kissed his mother on the forehead and left the room. It was a relief to think that there was something heroic in his attitude after all,—that his sisters would never know what he had given up for them.

And then at last he opened his *fiancée's* letter.

Alice always wrote a neat and formal hand, but this was obviously a "revise"; it looked like a page from a prize copy-book.

"My dear Giles,

"I have not wished to trouble you in the midst of all you have been going through; but I cannot help feeling that I shall really lessen your trouble by what I am going to say. It is, that I set you quite, quite free from your engagement to me. It is not your fault if you have met some one prettier, or cleverer, or nicer than I am. I hope you will be very happy, and you must not fret about me. We are both in God's hands still.

"Alice."

However good a woman may be, she is apt to give such a letter a touching little note of finality which does not truly reflect her frame of mind. But Giles was too inexperienced to know this. At a first cursory perusal the letter seemed to him a wonder of modesty and self-restraint and silent martyrdom. Alice was no coquette, and Alice was giving him up;—his splendid act of renunciation was rendered null and void. The support on which his mother was counting was a broken reed; his sisters—well, his sisters would soon have for their nearest male relative a struggling young doctor, with a wife of his own to support. So long as Professor Harrington's offer seemed forced upon him, Giles had deemed it an easy thing to carve his own way; but now that Fate had taken him, so to speak, at his word, he began to reckon chances more sanely, to remember how long the very best men in the profession had often been obliged to wait. He would succeed, no doubt; but what if by that time his mother lay quiet in her grave, and Edith was worn and pinched, and Maud self-assertive and hard, and Lulie roughened

and cheapened by intercourse with girls of a lower class than her own?

And, above all, there was Alice. What had happened to her? He had always taken her worship as a matter of course. The merest suggestion of uncertainty gave it a value it had lacked hitherto. Whatever happened he must get to the bottom of this mystery. What could Alice have heard? If she was prepared to give him up,—why, then, his course was clear; but somehow the thought made her more precious in his eyes. In any case he must hear what she had to say.

He had grown used to white, tear-stained faces of late, but, even so, Alice took him by surprise. To think that self-contained little Alice could look like this! On the impulse of the moment he took her in his arms. "Why, child, what is the matter?"

It was too much. The hot tears welled up, and there, in his arms, she sobbed out her pitiful little story.

And here at last was the ultimate—the final—parting of the ways.

Giles thought of his sisters, of his weak fragile mother, of the sobbing girl in his arms; and then of Vera—far, far away—in a world of sunshine and laughter. Whatever happened, Vera would fall on her feet. He had known Alice all his life; she represented to him goodness, respectability, success, family duty,—everything that his world held good. Vera had on her side a few wild, irresponsible weeks. Above all, Vera was absent—off somewhere in fairyland. Alice was here, crying out—sobbing in his arms—for an answer.

"Alice, Alice!" he cried, "why didn't you tell me at once? Silly sweetheart! To think that my little

saint should be jealous! Why, Vera was a child, a mere child,—staying with her father at the hotel. I used to play with her."

He threw his whole weight into the lie, and it served its turn. Alice was reassured.

Was she reassured? Not really. She felt his heart thumping as if it would burst, and she raised her head in time to see an unaccustomed tremor about the muscles of his mouth. Vera was a child, no doubt, yet perhaps not quite a child——

Alas! there was a traitor in the camp. Alice loved too dearly to give him up. No other woman in the world could feel towards him as she did,—least of all the chance acquaintance of a few weeks. If Vera was a child, she would soon forget; and as for Giles, Alice would be so tender when she got him all to herself that he could not but love her,—her only.

And so their first difference was made up.

That night Giles read his *fiancée's* letter again, before putting it in the fire,—read it slowly and carefully, as he might, perhaps with advantage, have read it at first.—"We are both in God's hands still."

Yes, God would have taken care of Alice if he had forsaken her; but it was difficult to think of Vera in relation to God. The Creator could not be angry with her. No, no; not with a creature of impulse like that. Was He angry with the dragon-flies that dart and flash in the sunshine? It almost seemed to Giles as if Vera was a being with whom God had no concern.

And then—the wonderful eyes, with their mocking lights and infinite depths, rose on the darkness, as he had seen them that night—that night!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BUBBLE BREAKS.

"Ah, Monsieur will never take Mademoiselle back to the grey north at this time of year. The snow would kill her. She is growing thin and she coughs."

Mr Carruthers nodded absently without replying. The words scarcely penetrated to his consciousness. He and Vera happened to be lunching at the hotel that day, and the landlady had been struck by the change in the girl's appearance.

Ten minutes later, however, Mr Carruthers' attention really was roused. Vera had turned her head to follow the course of a man-of-war on the horizon, and—just at a certain angle—her father noticed a change in the contour of her face. The cheek-bone was a trifle more prominent than it had been, and below it there was a slight concavity in the petal-like curve. The effect was singularly fine; trifling as was the actual change, it lent her face an air of pensiveness and intellectuality that appealed to him strongly; but at her age it was premature.

"How did you catch cold, Vera?" he asked abruptly.

She started and flushed. "I don't know that I did catch cold, Dad. It's nothing. I shall be all right in a day or two."

He looked perplexed. "March is a bad time of year to go north," he said; "but I don't see that we can help it."

"Of course we can't, dear."

Even he noticed that the cheerfulness in her voice was forced, and the cloud on his brow deepened. "I might leave you behind, of course; but I don't see who I could send to be with you."

"Why, Dad, however could you get along without me to bully you?"

"I would rather do that than have you ill." He did not add that the constant differences of opinion between Vera and her stepmother made his life at home less reposeful than it might have been. "It is the difficulty of a chaperon I am thinking about."

A great hope rose in Vera's heart, lending a new brightness to eye and voice. "Darling," she said caressingly, "for an emancipated man you are curiously conventional. What harm could come to me for a few weeks? Why not leave me under Madame's chaperonage? She would certainly look after my body, and I don't mind undertaking my own mind."

It was so long before he answered that she felt uncertain as to whether her suggestion had "got in."

"Well," he said reluctantly at last, "after all, it is only for a month or two. You are sure you would not mind being alone?" The question as to whether he could trust her never so much as crossed his mind. Trust *Vera!*

"Mind? I should love it. That is to say—of course I shall miss you horribly; but—it is very weak and foolish of me—but I do dread the snow this year—the snow, and—other things."

A horrible fear seized her that she was going to cry,

and she strangled a great sob in her throat. It would never do—here by daylight, with her father's eyes upon her—to begin to think of all the things she dreaded. There was plenty of time for that at night when the house was still. But if only he would go away and leave her to think things out and pull herself together, all might yet be well. It was worth fortunes—untold fortunes—to be allowed to stay, to escape her stepmother's scrutiny, and feel herself alone among strangers. Fortunes? Why, Giles might come any day, and then how laughable this nightmare would seem! Of course he would come. She sprang to her feet, the gay Vera of former days, and her father saw for the first time how forced had been her mood of late. "What a child of the sun she is," he thought. "To think she should have dreaded going north so much as this, and without saying a word."

And so it was arranged that Vera should be left behind. "From this time forward," her father said, "I will see that your income is paid direct to you every quarter. It was your dear mother's wish that you should have it in your own hands from the time you left school. At present you will have no difficulty in keeping within the limits of your £200 a-year. You will be sensible about it, won't you?"

Vera nodded slowly. There was a great seriousness in her eyes.

"No one knows so well as I what reserves of strength there are in my little girl. I do trust you absolutely, Vera."

She smiled brightly back, but dared not put a loving hand in his, as was her custom in moments of great feeling. The touch might betray too much. She

wondered how it was he did not hear the frantic beating of her heart.

And so a day came when Mr Carruthers went away, leaving his daughter alone among strangers. Vera had gone with him to the station, and on her return, without entering the hotel, had strolled along the beach, determined to face the situation.

It was one of those glorious days that are made for happy people, or for those who have learned something of

> " – the soothing thoughts that spring
> Out of human suffering."

There was little wind on shore, but the great waves rolled in, long, calm, irresistible, each in turn forming a palace of beauty, a green translucent shell, perfect in form and colour. Again and again it seemed as if a thing so beautiful must not die; but there was always a new one to take its place, as lovely as the last. Nay, lovelier than the last, for little by little the eye was trained to see a new glow, a new curve, a new colour. It was almost more than Vera could bear. What was the good of it all? What was the use of beauty when there were only two eyes to see it? The sense of incompleteness, of heart-hunger, came over her with a force that made her white and faint.

"Giles! *Giles!*"

There was no danger in trusting his name to the winds. The noise of the waves drowned all other sounds, and no one visited this lonely coast save the patrol who had already gone by. It seemed to Vera as if Giles *must* hear that cry,—as if nothing on all the earth could have power to stand against its overwhelming force. Had it not left her weak and trembling, spent as though she had been cast up on

those rocks after long and weary buffeting with the waves?

It was nearly two months now since Giles had gone. She unlocked the satchel she always wore, and drew from its inner pocket a bundle of letters. One of these —the first—was almost falling to pieces. It was a love-letter so impassioned that it satisfied even her,— one of those rare letters that make a woman feel she could not have written a better herself. After that came tidings of a father's death-struggle—of death; of course he could not write much of love just then; and this was followed by news of poverty, of great perplexity, of a mother and sisters dependent on Giles for support. And then—there had been but one letter more.

At first Vera had kept her own personality resolutely in the background,—had striven to think only of how these sad events affected him; but little by little her letters had become more urgent. "Giles," she had written at last, "I cannot live without you. My heart holds out such empty arms. I have money enough for us both. Come back. Love me." And to that had come an answer that she could not understand. It was full of affection,—of love; it spoke of her as the one woman in all the world; but there was much said too of self-sacrifice,—of the claims of duty; there was a ring of farewell in every line.

The rest was silence.

He must be waiting till he could come and answer with a kiss. All sorts of things might have happened to detain him at the last; but he would come and take her in his arms again, and then this weary heart would stop shattering the frail walls that held it in,—this weary brain would sleep. Two tears, hot as molten lead, rose in her eyes. "Oh, if I could but sleep," she

said, "just for one little night, as I used to sleep night after night all my life, without knowing that I had anything to be grateful for!"

Then a great dread came over her. "I mustn't go mad," she said in a whisper, hoarse and voiceless—"not mad. I am afraid I shall miss Dad dreadfully after all. It was his little wants and demands that kept me sane. I will begin those drawings he wants at once; and perhaps—perhaps there is somebody at the hotel I can be kind to."

She was escaping to her room that evening as usual after dinner when the landlady met her at the door. "Mademoiselle will go to the salon," she said persuasively. "They want some one to cheer them up."

Perhaps she saw that it was Vera who wanted cheering up. One does meet these fine plants of courtesy on a somewhat arid soil.

"*Merci, Madame*," the girl was answering in her lofty manner; then suddenly she turned, hesitated, smiled, and passed into the salon without a word. The action was simplicity itself, but the grace of it went straight to the woman's heart. Vera had found a friend.

She played cards for an hour or two with a testy old lady, and then went upstairs. "How am I to face another night?" she said with haunted eyes; but soon after her head was on the pillow, sleep fell on her like summer rain, and her poor parched being floated out and was at rest.

It was well that she got that little breathing space, for there is a limit to human endurance, and the crisis was at hand. Some English people came over to lunch next day from a neighbouring town, and were so charmed with the situation of the hotel that they re-

solved to remain for a night or two. A sociable spirit prevailed in the salon that evening, and in the course of conversation it transpired that the newcomers came from Edinburgh.

Edinburgh? Did they know one Dr Willoughby?

Vera was seated in a low chair in a corner, apparently reading *The Queen*. With a last flash of resolution she said to herself,—"Faint if you like, but don't stir."

Oh, yes, indeed. Dr Willoughby was one of the rising men. He had just gone into partnership with a distinguished professor. The professor had no children, and Dr Willoughby was to marry his favourite niece in a month or two. His career was made.

At that moment the naval officer stepped violently on the paw of the great retriever who lay asleep in the middle of the room. A table was knocked over, and the contents of somebody's work-basket went reeling over the floor. When Vera felt herself coming back out of the blackness, the officer's broad back separated her from the rest of the room. He was apologizing profusely for his awkwardness. Feebly Vera drew *The Queen* towards her and turned a page.

She slept again that night, slept because she had no thoughts nor feelings to keep her awake. Her brain seemed a kindred thing to the pillow on which it lay.

She woke with that awful sense of oppression—that consciousness of an unknown something wrapt in the mists ahead. She had parted from it when she fell asleep last night. What was it?

Lie still. No need to go and meet it. It will come. Its step is slow, but steady and sure as time and fate. It is coming. The mists are growing thin,—

We have all lain and waited for it as Vera did. Sometimes it is a mere nothing, a trifling worry, the

aura of a strain relaxed; sometimes it is the remembrance of the dear dead thing lying swathed and still in the room adjoining ours.

But for Vera it was the worst thing of all.

An hour later she got up and opened her *volets*. The crisp morning air made her cough. She could hear voices on the verandah below.

"How she coughs!" said the landlady sympathetically. "She will die now, poor little thing. She might have got over her cold, but there's nought like a broken heart for speeding one's way to the grave."

"True," said the golden-haired lady philosophically, "and at her age hearts really do break. She's young and she's pretty,—to be beaten in life so soon."

Vera started back as if she had been stabbed. She turned to the shabby pier-glass and drew herself up with a gesture that was superb. Never before had she seemed to herself so fair a thing.

"*Beaten?*" she said, "*I?* How dare they?" She watched the lines of her face harden into a steely mask. Then she walked very slowly back to the window.

The sun shone down in a golden haze; great yellow clusters of mimosa stood out from the blue of the sea; two or three little boats drifted idly to and fro; and the parrot hopped gaily about, as though he quite realized that the scarlet in his plumage was the dominant note in the glorious chord of colour.

But Vera saw none of these things. In a hideous flash of realism she caught sight of her future—as those women saw it.

Presently she spoke in a low suppressed voice. "Life," she said, "you are hard and bitter and cruel, and I hate you. But I won't be beaten, do you hear? I won't! I won't! *So help me God!*"

Where the prayer came from she never knew. Perhaps it was only an echo from some story she had read. It seemed to surge through the room, carrying her before it like a leaf before the wind,—"*So help me God!*"

PART II.

CHAPTER XV.

SIX YEARS LATER.

THE actual scene is dreary enough,—a poorly furnished room in Ixelles, that somewhat squalid and shabby suburb of gay little Brussels. A cheap lamp stands on the table, and a shade has been improvised to cast as much light as possible on the books and papers that are strewn about. The window is open to let out the fumes of the coke stove, and one hears all too plainly the noises of the street, dominated at present by the solicitations of the man who is selling roasted chestnuts just below.

But the sole occupant of the room—a studious, dogged-looking young woman in a well-worn dressing-gown—is aware of none of these things. Her mind has taken flight, leaving behind it an unresponsive, almost forbidding, mask. She pictures herself seated, half-hidden by palms, in the quiet corner of a brilliantly lighted suite of rooms. The scent of hothouse flowers is in the air, and everything speaks of luxury and wealth unlimited. What gowns, what jewels, what animation and brilliant talk! Now slowly, softly, the orchestra begins to breathe; one scarcely knows the actual moment when its silence passed into sound; but it is swelling steadily with the repressed strength of a giant until the whole house throbs with the glorious life of it.

Now it falls again, lower, lower; there is silence in the room, and an impressive person at the door announces—

"Mademoiselle de Matharel."

The hostess—that handsome, portly lady in velvet and diamonds—receives the newcomer kindly if without *empressement;* but how everyone turns to look!

And well they may, for here is a real woman, ringing fresh and true from Nature's mint. The solitary student can vouch that there is not an artifice nor a trick about that woman anywhere; and she ought to know, for did she not watch the swift twist of that magical knot of dusky hair, did she not help to fasten that simple, wonderful gown? Even in the midst of all this wealth the gown seems wonderful,—shimmering into light, shading into rose that finds new depth of expression in the fine bass note of those dark-red roses. The student gives a second glance to make sure that the roses are not too dark; they looked almost black this afternoon when she bought them in the *Montagne de la Cour,* sacrificing in a glad moment of impulse two sorely-needed new pairs of gloves. No, they are perfect. The brilliant light brings out every shade of colour—

Ah, that elderly man with the grand manner and the order on his breast wants to be introduced. Trust him to know a woman when he sees her! He will take her down to supper by-and-by. Or will she perhaps by that time have made acquaintance with the grey-haired professor, who looks a little "out of it" at present, but who will soon find a woman who knows something of his subject,—who knows something, and who seems to know a good deal more?

"Vera, Vera, Vera!" cried the lonely student. "How I hate you!"

With a mighty effort she brought her eyes back from infinity, and focussed them on her books.

It was far into the night when the door opened, and, with a great breath of vitality, Mademoiselle de Matharel came in. Her hair was a little tossed, her great eyes sparkling.

"How sweet of you to sit up for me!" she cried. "I am longing so for some one to talk to, and oh, dear, how hungry I am! Yes, make some cocoa, do! Chestnuts? How lovely! No, let me roast them."

"Another triumph, no doubt?" said the other frigidly.

Vera took the roses from her breast, raised them tenderly to her lips for a moment, and plunged them into a basin of water.

"It was the roses that did it then," she said. "But yes; it has all been perfectly, perfectly lovely."

"And now poor little Cinderella comes back to her kitchen. No, don't sit on that. I will fetch half-a-dozen cushions from your room."

When she returned, her companion was looking almost pensive.

"I wish you had been there," she said.

"Truly?" with a quick eager glance.

"Most truly."

"I wonder why?"

Vera drew down her brows in reflection. "Well," she said, "when I am so very happy I usually begin to wonder afterwards whether I have not made a fool of myself."

"I see. And I could have reassured you?"

Vera nodded absently.

The student's face fell. For a moment she looked at her companion expectantly, then her expression slowly

changed to that of a philosopher who finds compensation for many rebuffs in a dispassionate study of human nature.

"Well, for sheer artless, brutal self-absorption—" she said to herself. She almost hoped Vera would surprise her critical glance, and demand an explanation; but there seemed no chance of that, so she returned defiantly to her books.

The silence was not long.

"Miss Johnston," said a soft, deprecating voice from the shadows.

"Yes?" harshly.

By her own showing, Mademoiselle de Matharel was twenty-three, but she looked a mere child curled up among the cushions,—a little heap of chestnut-shells by her side. "Tell me—did I look *rather* nice?"

"Yes."

"Almost—*very* nice?"

"I am too tired and too cross to find adjectives strong enough."

"You—you don't think they only did it out of pity?"

"Did what out of pity?—Who?"

"Everybody."

Miss Johnston shut her book with a bang, and stooped to kiss her friend with a sudden irresistible impulse. "What a chameleon you are!" she said. "Do you remember how you kept me at arm's-length only last week?"

Vera looked half startled for a moment as if the words contained a warning, and when she spoke again it was with less perfect *abandon*. "Last week," she said "has no existence for me."

"And next week?"

Vera shivered "Oh, don't!" she said. "Next week has still less. Have you not found out my genus yet? —*Ephemera.*"

The other nodded several times rather bitterly. "So you say, so you say," she said; "but what would you think if I said so? How you surprised those people to-night when they found a ring of real humanity behind those diaphanous folds! And by-and-by, when you grew suddenly serious, and the deep tone crept into your voice, and the mystery into your eyes—oh, I know you, I know you!—they saw that you too, child as you are, had lived."

Vera's great eyes were fixed. The child-look had gone completely. She seemed suddenly to have grown up. "Ay," she said. "We do live—we, *Ephemera*—while we are at it."

She was in the mood now that her companion never could resist. "Do you know," she said, "I am so horribly, horribly envious of you?"

Vera stroked the brown hand caressingly. "Was that why you gave me the roses?" she said. "You dear, generous, extravagant girl!"

"Partly. No; don't laugh. I am so envious that it hurts."

"Because my employer is good enough to invite her poor little governess to a crush at her house?"

"She has treated you like a 'poor little governess,' hasn't she? And she wasn't at all proud of you to-night, I suppose?"

Vera smiled quietly, as if at the memory of a speech she was glad to recall. "She *is* good," she said. "Do you know——" She paused.

"Well?"

"I don't believe I did make a fool of myself to-night after all."

"Really? If you had, I suppose the sun would rise in the morning as usual."

Vera started. "What have I done?"

"Nothing. I don't know why one should be angry with one's fellows for not being great."

"No. Even one's anger wants an occasional close time." But Vera was piqued nevertheless. "Why am I specially small?"

"I did not say you were specially small. I was thinking you are too attractive, too creditable, to be great. The great people are rather apt to make fools of themselves, and apt not to care when they do."

"Now I wonder." Vera rose to her feet and took a turn up and down the room. "I should not in the least mind making a fool of myself if the occasion was big enough. If one goes on making a fool of oneself all the time, there is nothing left to make a fool of, so to speak, when the big occasion comes."

Miss Johnston shrugged her shoulders. "Pray don't think I envy you because Mrs Trevithick makes much of you and invites you to parties. I envy you because *you have never thrown away a chance in life.*"

"I haven't?"

There was scarcely a query in the words. The expression of face and voice was indescribable, but so subtle, so restrained, that it passed unnoticed.

"Life is a game," went on Miss Johnston bitterly, "and some of us have thrown away most of our pieces before we realize the value of them. Then we are left to checkmate Fate with a king and a pawn! You have never thrown away a piece."

Silence.

"I wondered at first how you had achieved so much; but I begin to see it now. You have never missed a chance. Of course a private income is an enormous help; but I verily believe you would have done it without that. I don't believe you have ever had a lesson in music or riding, or anything else, out of which you have not squeezed the last drop of advantage. I don't believe you ever speak to a great lady without getting something out of her. I despised them at your age. Well, you have your reward. Look at us two as we sit here now."

"The comparison is made under artificial conditions," said Vera drily. "Shall I put on a dressing-gown before we proceed? I think I have one nearly as shabby as that."

"Oh, no. The conditions are not artificial. They are just typical of all the rest." Miss Johnston spoke slowly with much emphasis. "Typical, typical, typical. And you cannot form the dimmest notion how hard it is for a poor devil like me to go on with the game,—how one longs to chuck over the board and begin all over again." She paused, looking perhaps for a word of consolation; but it did not come. "And that," she concluded coldly, "is just what we can never do."

"*Are you sure?*" The voice was low but intensely audible.

"Absolutely sure."

There was a restless little movement among the cushions, but the student did not look round. "I would give—my share of those chestnuts (which, by the way, seems to be a vanishing one,) to know what your motive force has been. You are not religious."

"That is true."

"Then it was sheer appreciation of your own exceptional endowments? Odd that that should have come so early."

"Is there any harm in trying to make the most of oneself? It is the only thing one can be sure of. I never do a kind action without regretting it. But this Me" (she tapped herself on the chest) "is different: it responds. Did you ever sit in a great cathedral at vespers, and drink in the beauty of the arches and groins, and then see two average middle-class Englishwomen come and stand between you and the chancel? If people believe in God, why do they build cathedrals to His honour, and make such sorry, stuccoed shanties of themselves? Yet no doubt those two average middle-class Englishwomen are converted Christians, and logically believe themselves to be the temple of the Holy Ghost."

"*Oh!*" The student was startled out of her resolution never to check her companion's unconscious self-revelation by seeming surprised at anything she said. She pulled herself together quickly. "Well, you certainly are a striking instance of what sheer unaided humanity can do. And you are content? You don't feel the need of anything outside yourself?" Her voice sank to a whisper, and she trembled at her own daring; but Vera was in an unusually expansive mood, and the interest of the enquiry overrode everything else,—"You never pray?"

But she had gone just too far. Vera sprang to her feet. "Don't I?" she said. "Oh, yes. I do. I never begin the day without praying, *Help me to take this day by the horns, and not to be dragged through at its tail!* Good-night! Good-night!"

Her own room was large and comfortable, a contrast to the one she had left. Her face was very hard as she looked at it in the glass; but she saw only its force, its beauty. "And now, Madame," she said, "we'll have no more of these confidences, these expansions! So she pricked your bubble for you, did she? Poor little three-year-old! Serve you right for letting her come so close! You have never thrown away a chance in life, she says. Oh, *mon dieu, mon dieu!*"

The tears welled up, but, with a great effort of the will, she drove them back. She could not afford to spoil the beauty of her eyes. The one conscious aim of her life for years had been to realize herself in every way, to be admired, respected, loved, to be assured that she was good and clever and beautiful. "It is such folly, such rank conventional folly, to say I am not good. Because a little girl—who was not *me* at all—spent a guileless summer day in the sunshine, *my* life, my life of thought and will and purpose—oh, my life of affection and passion, if you will!—is to be blighted for evermore. I wish there were a God, that He might judge between me and some of those women to-night!"

With the fingers of both hands she smoothed out the furrow from her brow. That would come soon enough, and it must not come before——

Before the event to which, in the background of her mind, she was always looking forward. Sooner or later she would meet Giles Willoughby again: she had not a moment's doubt of that. She would not go in search of the meeting. It was gravitating towards her surely and steadily. She must not hurry it; but in the

meantime she must become a finer thing every day she lived.

How would the meeting be? Should she treat him as Dido treated Æneas in the land of the shades?—or—or—— But there! Better not to plan; better not even to think of it. The moment would come, and it would be a dramatic moment,—possibly the culminating moment in the life of both.

CHAPTER XVI.

PROBLEMS.

"THE fact is," said Mrs Trevithick sententiously, "it is the man who makes the position, and not the position the man. She is not an ordinary governess, and I should be a fool if I treated her as one."

"But, my dear, reflect how little you know of her."

"Know? I know quite enough." Mrs Trevithick looked at her visitor severely. "One can see at a glance that she 'comes of kent folk,' and she knows quite a number of the people one knows, you know. You never saw such testimonials. And look how the girls have improved. They worship the ground she walks on. The saving of friction in the house since she came is worth a few hundred a year. What have you against her? She certainly looked very pretty last night, but so simple and such good form. And, if you watch her with men——"

"That is just it. I have nothing against her, except that I don't believe in treasures."

"She is not a treasure," protested Mrs Trevithick indignantly; "my cook is that. Mademoiselle always gives me a feeling of 'personality,' if you know what I mean. Ever since Edith's illness, I have looked upon her as a friend. No sister could have been more devoted."

"It was worth her while."

"You old cynic! Yes; I hope it was worth her while. I mean it to be."

"You had better confess frankly that you have ceased to be critical where she is concerned. Take her accomplishments one by one, and what do they amount to? Nothing very great. She is intelligent, and she has lived with cultured people. But her one outstanding *qualité* is this gift of mesmeric attraction."

"And a very good quality it is."

"Oh, a very good quality indeed,—for the possessor. Some day one of your men friends will take a fancy to her."

"Oh, half-a-dozen of them have done that already; but I don't know whether any one of them is good enough. I want a *man* for Vera. She is very heart-whole so far, I assure you. Do you know she teaches for love of the work?—she has means of her own?"

"That accounts for much, I admit. To him that hath shall be given."

When the visitor was gone, Mrs Trevithick rang the bell. "Tell Mademoiselle I should like her to come and have a cup of tea with me before she goes."

Vera entered, looking rather pale, but she approached her patroness with an air of gentle deference that harmonized very prettily with her background of "personality." Mrs Trevithick looked with critical appreciation at the tailor-made gown. It was so exactly the right thing.

"Well, Mademoiselle, is everything satisfactory?"

"Very satisfactory, I think."

"And the Christmas play promises well?"

"I think so." Vera's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. "I mean it to be a great success."

"You really ought to publish some of your drawing-room plays. There is a piquancy about them that one rarely finds in such productions."

Vera laughed and shook her head. "I must do something better first. Your approval is all I ask at present. I was going to give the girls an extra hour's drilling when you sent for me."

"Very kind of you, I am sure. And that brings me to what I was going to say. I think you have a friendly feeling for me and mine."

"You might put it a good deal more strongly than that." Vera spoke with a quiet earnestness that was real in the main.

"And I need not tell you that the feeling is reciprocated. You know, dear, I feel that, humanly speaking, we owe Edith's life to you."

"A sick child's fancy. It might have been anyone else."

"That does not alter the fact that it *was you*. Now tell me,—are you going home for the holidays?"

"*Home!*" Vera knew she ought not to allow herself that look and intonation, but the temptation was strong.

"Well, to those little brothers and sisters you told me of?"

"I haven't been asked. My stepmother thinks I am not religious enough to have any dealings with her children."

Mrs Trevithick patted her hand. "I am sure you are quite religious enough."

Vera smiled with irresistible frankness. "Well, *I* think so," she said simply. "I wish I could have the children over here, and give them a real good time. You have no idea what a dreary life they lead, poor

mites! Dingy evangelicalism——" She stopped, realizing that—naturally—her patroness did not care a rush for the little brothers and sisters.

"Then what are you going to do when lessons are over?"

"Read Schopenhauer, and go to the Wiertz Museum."

"Oh, my dear child!"

"And skate."

"That's better." Mrs Trevithick looked at Vera's trim, graceful figure, and pictured her swooping over the ice like a swallow. "Now the fact is, I want you to come and spend the holidays with us."

Vera's face shone,—then turned white to the lips. "You *are* good," she said, "but of course I could not think of such a thing."

"I can't bear to think of you in those dingy lodgings. I never have liked the idea. In fact I don't think it is quite—*convenable*. So pack your trunks as soon as possible and come."

"Indeed I am very happy there." Vera was a little breathless. "There is a dear old thing who serves the purpose of chaperon." (Miss Johnston, *ætat.* twenty-seven, would have smiled grimly at the description.) "And the girls need a change from me."

"In other words, you need a change from them? Well, we'll see that you get it. But of course they will be wild with delight when I tell them."

Every word seemed to rivet the chain. "Why, why," cried Vera in the agony of her heart, "can people not be content to take their money's worth out of me, and leave me alone?"

"Now don't protest any more. It is settled. . . . Don't you like the idea?"

Now was her chance. Now was the time to say that she preferred her liberty. But that would put an end to this pleasant life, and oh, dear, it was so good to be loved and petted,—to be mothered by this sweet, kind woman! Vera felt herself in a little circle of light and peace. Outside—a whirlwind swept over chaos.

"Like it!" she said.

"I declare she looks like a Peri at the gate of Paradise. Are you a humbug after all, Mademoiselle, or do you really not realize the extent to which life lies at your bidding?"

Vera took the white jewelled hand, and pressed it humbly, almost passionately, to her lips.

"What disturbs you so, child? I declare she is trembling. Come! Have another cup of tea, and tell me all about it."

Mrs Trevithick's manner was still very kind, yet she could not but remember the warning of her friend.

Vera hesitated, and, as she hesitated, realized that now she must explain something. What if she were to tell the whole truth? Ah, that would bring about a transformation indeed. She saw the kind motherly face harden into stone, saw herself driven from the house, chastised with scorpions, and life to begin all over again in another corner of the globe. "And yet, and yet, I am all she thinks me now,—all that and more."

She drank the tea and thought of Socrates drinking the hemlock. She would explain something presently. She wished she knew what it was going to be. Take time; no hurry; if this had to be done, let it be done with due care and regard for the future.

When she set down her cup, she had recovered

her self-possession. "When I applied for this place," she said, "I looked upon the arrangement as a purely business one between you and me. I had certain qualifications and credentials for which you were prepared to pay."

"Quite so." Mrs Trevithick's voice was as kind as ever, but her face hardened perceptibly.

"But, little by little, you have established a stronger claim on me, and I wish I had told you at first what I am going to tell you now."

"Yes?"

Vera stretched out her hands to the English fire. "When I see your girls growing up in this sheltered home, like chickens under their mother's wing, I can't help feeling a little bitter."

"Your own mother died when you were quite young?"

"Yes, and I was scarcely Kathleen's age when my father died too. A tolerable income came to me in the end; but at first there were difficulties, and I had to face the world with no preparation save a good education. All at once a chance offered. An English family,—rich and *bourgeois*,—wanted a Frenchwoman to travel with them, officially as governess, unofficially as courier."

"But you were so young!"

"I think I looked older then than I do now."

"And for a French girl——"

"That is the point. My mother was French; my father was English. I had travelled a great deal with him, and I knew I could do all that was required, and I spoke French like a native; but my name was against me. They wanted their penny's worth, my employers, so—I took my mother's name."

There was a moment's silence.

"Is that all?"

"That is all."

"Well, well, well." Mrs Trevithick patted the strong nervous hand. "It was a mistake, of course, for, if anyone had found it out who knew you less well than I do, they might think you had graver reasons for changing your name."

The danger was past. "Yes," said Vera meekly. Her first feeling was one of overwhelming relief; but a moment later she saw that the relief was illusory. She had unlocked the door indeed; but it was the wrong door. Instead of breathing the open air, she was in a darker dungeon.

"And yet there was wisdom in it too. I confess I prefer Mademoiselle de Matharel to Miss——?"

"Carruthers."

"Your father was——?"

Vera breathed more freely, and there was a touch of proud defiance in the movement of her head. "My father was a student,—a man of science, the friend of Darwin and Haeckel. He did not care for fame nor to make a reputation. He loved to live in a corner and to do good work." In her rising enthusiasm she left herself and her troubles behind, and she raised a glowing face with fine honest eyes full to Mrs Trevithick. "Oh," she said, "there is no woman living who has more cause to be proud of her father than I have."

That settled it. It only remained to arrange details. Vera was to go to the Boulevard Waterloo for the holidays, and perhaps for good.

She was no longer pale when she left the house. Her cheeks burned like fire. She was chastised with

scorpions indeed, though only with those of an accusing conscience.

"Oh, you bungler, you bungler, you fool!" she said between her teeth. "Of all the weak, washy, unnecessary stories! What if you had been in the witness-box at the mercy of a cross-examining counsel? Can't you choose one line or the other and stick to it? Either wear the 'A' frankly on your breast and let the good ladies stoop to 'reclaim' you, or else—lie like a man! Put your back into it, and have something to show for your lies!"

Night had closed in, and the wind was high. The dead leaves rattled past her on the boulevard with a sickening emptiness of sound. In the morning she had called them pixies and elves, and her heart had danced with them in the sunshine. Now they seemed like disembodied spirits, drifting drearily along in a region of purposeless woe.

Suddenly a horror of great darkness came upon her, —a prevision of impending evil so overwhelming that she became unconscious of her physical surroundings. The sweat stood in great cold drops on her brow, and involuntarily she clung to the railing for support.

"I am like Lady Godiva," she thought, "riding through the town. Just now every shutter is closed; but some day—at any moment—they will spring open, and—in the midst of countless jeering eyes—I shall be naked and alone."

The physical anguish of the moment amounted almost to madness. Surely never before had it been so unbearable as this.

A minute later she was speeding through the streets like a hunted hare. Dignity? What was that when all the fiends were behind?

A bright wood fire burned in her sitting-room, and Miss Johnston's homely face was a welcome in itself. "What's the matter?" she cried. "You look ill. Has some one been following you again? What brutes these men are! Sit down in the big chair, and I will give you a glass of wine. See, I have put your slippers to the fire."

It was all so commonplace and reassuring that Vera could have sobbed aloud. "You are very good," she said humbly, as she allowed herself to be petted and made much of; and so, little by little, the anguish passed.

"What a fool I am!" she thought. "Only one human being knows, and she — she loves me. There is nothing so safe as love — save only death. And after all, am I not in the same *galère* as half the women who have lived in history?"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DEBATING SOCIETY.

It was Sarah's night out.

And for that reason it had long been fixed upon for the weekly meeting of the Debating Society. There is nothing like a kitchen for debating in—when Sarah is out. The table is roomy, the fire is good, the range of dish-covers is a source of inspiration, and—most important of all—no tiresome people come dropping in to check the flow of soul with their meaningless platitudes.

"Debating Society Night" was one of the two fixed functions of the week, the other being "Toffee Night." That, however, was held in the dining-room on Thursdays when Mrs Carruthers was absent at the weekly prayer-meeting held in the schoolroom of the chapel she attended.

The presence of a carpet and hearthrug lends a special piquancy somehow to the preparation of toffee, and so does the awful dread that Sarah may come in at any moment to "see to the fire."

"I am sure," said Harold, stifling a yawn, "that we are all much obliged to our friend for his interesting paper. I confess I have learned a good deal about Mexico to-night that I did not know before." He was seated in the well-scoured deal arm-chair with his feet on the boiler.

"I thought that so awfully interesting about the puma," said Aline, caressing the family cat as she spoke.

"At the same time," said Judith, the elder sister, dispassionately, "I think your title was too big. You called it 'Mexico,' and then you only told us it was in North America, and went on to the birds and beasts and plants. You might as well lecture on the ocean, and only talk about pearls. There are other things besides pearls in the ocean——" she paused and went on apologetically, "there are Gulf Streams."

The feeling of the meeting was against the severity of the criticism, and particularly against the flippancy of the closing simile. The paper had been read by the youngest member of the family, and, regarded in that light, it really was remarkable. In any case it was over now. *Requiescat!*

The object of these divers criticisms lay full length on the table, his hands clasped under his head. With a hasty movement he raised himself on his elbow. "I could have told you lots more—lots!" he said indignantly; "but when I saw you growing sleepier and sleepier——"

"Eric, how can you? I wasn't a bit sleepy, and I don't believe you had any more *written*."

This was unanimously considered to be hitting below the belt.

"Let me see now,—there was something else I particularly wanted to say——" Eric drew a shabby old tome lovingly towards him.

"Oh, I say, chuck it!" protested Harold, dropping his *rôle* of chairman. "Time's up. Let's do something else. I'll read you some more of *Hiawatha*."

"To-morrow's Sunday," put in the gentle Aline,

"and I don't believe any of us have read Barnes' *Notes* for Mother's class in the afternoon. I brought them in with me——"

Harold opened the oven door, extracted a piece of firewood, and aimed it neatly at the book. It disturbed the equilibrium of the cat, and, in the effort to save both, Aline let the *Notes* fall. They had seen much service, and their fall was an abject one. With a painful sense of desecration, the child gathered up the loose leaves, and her expression of awe was reflected in the faces of the others.

Harold was the first to shake it off.

"A crash, a scream, and all was o'er,"

he extemporized melodramatically.

As was the custom in their little circle, Judith took up the refrain,

"The book lay shattered upon the floor."

Eric threw up his arms in mock despair,—

"The children fled and went to bed,"

Aline was still awestruck, but she had to chime in with the voice of the avenger,

"But soon the Mother she opened the door."

After that the doggerel went spinning on, each child taking a line more or less in turn.

"'Children,' said she,"
"'How can this be?'"
"'Open the door,'"
"'Look on the floor.'"
"There lay the book the same as before."

There was a pause, and then Judith solemnly introduced the second stanza. This time the poem proceeded smoothly enough.

"A crash, a scream, and all was o'er,
The *children* lay shattered upon the floor;
The *Mother* fled and went to bed,
But soon the *Father* he opened the door.
'Wife,' said he,
'How can this be?
Open the door,
Look on the floor.'
There lay the *children* the same as before!

A crash, a scream, and all was o'er:
The *Mother* lay shattered upon the floor,
The *Father* fled and went to bed,
But soon the *Grandmother* opened the door.
'Son,' said she——"

With a shout of glee the children hailed the appearance of each new relative in the *rôle* of avenger, and there was obviously nothing in the moral of the poem to prevent its going on forever. The exigencies of metre, fortunately, prohibited the entry of any relative in the direct line more remote than the greatgrandfather.

"Of all the awful rot!" said Harold, trying to control the muscles of his face. "I say,—let's do something in the style of *Hiawatha*. That's something like a metre."

"On a dreary night in winter,"
"When the embers red were glowing,"
"And the wind was howling loudly,"
"Through the summits of the pine-trees;"
"When the wolves were prowling softly,"
"Far beyond the range of torches,"
"And the booming of the bittern"
"Sounded weirdly o'er the marshes"—
"Then the father told the children"
"Of the glorious days behind them——"

Here there fell a long pause.

"Get on, can't you?"

Judith gasped. She had read a good deal for her

age; but the ancient history of a land that produced wolves and bitterns was beyond her. Womanlike, she evaded the difficulty,—

"Of the days not yet forgotten——"
"When a mighty troop of foemen,"

ventured Eric, greatly daring.

"From the land beyond the borders,"
"Waged wild war upon——"

Another pause. Judith burst into hysterical laughter,—

"—the bitterns!"

Everybody laughed, and then everybody looked reproachful.

"I couldn't help it," she protested. "It was all the fault of whoever brought in the fathers and the children."

"It wasn't. It was the fault of those beastly bitterns. I haven't the least notion even how many legs the thing has."

A ring at the bell changed the subject of conversation.

"Postman," said Judith, "and if I take a letter in to Mother, I know she'll make me stop and read to her."

"I'll go," said Aline, and, deftly depositing *Barnes* and the cat in her chair, she slipped away.

She came back breathless with excitement and triumph. "I don't believe Mother heard the bell," she whispered. "It's a parcel—for you, Harold. Do you think we might open it without telling her?"

"*We*, forsooth! I rather think I'll open it when and where I choose. It's from Vera. She's a brick, is Vera."

The girls looked as if they had been accustomed to hear another view of the matter.

Harold kept them all on tenterhooks as long as he could; but even his fortitude gave way at last, and he carefully untied the knot.

Is there such another place in the world as Brussels for buying Christmas presents? As one treasure after another was unwrapped from its silver paper, hushed murmurs of admiration rose into a purring chorus. And what a giant box of chocolates! Even that was not all. There was a solid silver English half-crown for each of the four. Vera had not forgotten the charm of choosing one's pleasures. Last of all came two letters, one for Harold, and one for the whole *partie carrée.*

"MY DEAR LITTLE BROTHERS AND SISTERS,

"I wish with all my heart I was a rich woman, for then I would invite you all over here, and we would have a real jolly Christmas together. We would skate,—"

["*Skate!*" said Eric longingly.]

"—and go to the play—"

["*Go to the play!*" echoed Judith in a shocked whisper.]

"—and eat sweets and cakes in the most delightful shop you ever saw.

"But I am not a rich woman, so I can only send you a tiny slice of all the good things I wish you.

"Your loving sister,

"VERA."

"She's a brick," said Harold again. "Let's eat her health."

And the great box of chocolates was solemnly handed round.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FORCE OF A NAME.

"If any woman downstairs looks better than this," Vera said to herself,—"I shall learn something from her, that is all."

Her room was brilliantly lighted, and the mirrors were cunningly arranged to reflect her figure from every point of view. She was arrayed in a beautiful gown of pale apple-green silk; her hair, which had never grown very long, rippled and fluffed round the simple gold circlet that bound her head, and her face wore an expression of profound gravity.

"*The only question is*—whether I ought not to have a dash of complementary colour,—or do my face and hair supply that sufficiently? In any case one can't buy flowers for oneself, and I think—I *think*—it is all right. The mistake most women fall into is to make a gown a complete scheme in itself. A work of art? —Yes, indeed, Madame,—if only you would take yourself out of it!"

There was a knock at the door, and Mrs Trevithick's maid came in with a dainty florist's parcel. "For you, Mademoiselle. It has just come.".

"Thank you very much."

"Can I do anything for you, Mademoiselle? Madame has gone down."

"If you will arrange this lace for me, I shall be glad." The lace needed no arranging, but she was too wise to refuse a proffered service,—too wise to make it more than a very trifling one.

When the maid was gone, she opened the box, and displayed a brilliant spray of William Allen Richardson roses. Her eyes sparkled like a child's. "I believe," she said,—

Moving swiftly to the pier-glass, she raised the flowers to her breast. "—that it is *the — very — thing*."

Then a wonderful softening came over her face, and, supporting the flowers tenderly on the palms of both hands, she bent over them with an exquisite caressing gesture. "You dear, dear, good fellow," she said. "I love you, I love you! What am I to do?" She paced up and down the room, forgetful even for the moment of the furrow on her brow. "Oh, my dear, you are so good to me, and so strong, and so simple hearted; and who in all the world would make you so happy as I? I should be so pleasant, so indulgent, so easy to get on with. You can't guess how nice I should be; and indeed, indeed, in my heart of hearts, I am *gooder* than those women downstairs. I should never bore you, nor weary you. Why must I give you over to a grim white thing——?"

Then her face changed, and she laid the flowers on the table with a little gesture of weariness. "Do I love him?" she said. "Or am I only in love with his love for me? Sometimes he makes me feel—*ninety!* Shall I ever know my own heart again,—or have I no heart to know any more?"

She took a few more turns up and down the room.

"Why will men be in such a hurry? I have only known him three weeks."

"Intimately for three weeks," said Conscience, "casually for three months. For three weeks you have skated with him, sung with him, danced with him, sat out with him;—you could not feel more sure of his character at the end of three years."

Vera sat down and looked at her watch. "Ten minutes in which to decide. Let us keep to the point and have no high falutin'. Life is a game, as Miss Johnston said. Here is a good offer of marriage. Very good if I am to be reckoned as the governess. Fairly good if I am taken as a human being. Mrs Trevithick approves, with a rider in her own mind to the effect that I am a lucky young woman. I don't care to be considered a lucky young woman. It makes me feel I might do a great deal better; but everyone will think me lucky—except Miss Johnston, and one or two other men,—and the man himself. Yet I might have done better—from a worldly point of view—a year ago. It is idle to say I could not make a brilliant marriage,"—she raised her eyes to the glass—"of course I could. But a city that is set upon a hill cannot be hid. There is safety in seclusion, safety in mediocrity. I *hate* seclusion. I *hate* mediocrity. This man has few relations: he is comparatively free. He is good and generous. If—if anything happened—— Oh, why am I dependent on anyone's mercy? Why must I marry at all? I was made for a great career—to do and dare——"

Visions of Jeanne d'Arc floated through her mind as through the minds of so many girls before her. Oh, the passionate, generous, formless aspirations of youth,

—aspirations for which the stage of life is all too small! "Give me new heavens and a new earth that I may have room to realize these God-given powers!" But the walls close steadily in, and the shades of middle life fall, and youth is youth no longer when it learns that the problem was not to find room, but rather to find the greatness which can adapt itself to things so small.

The ten minutes were up. Vera raised the spray once more, and fastened it to her breast. "You understand now, I think," she said severely. "No more expansions, subtle suggestions, *leakages*. You are a cultured, self-respecting woman who need not blush to accept the love of any honest man."

. . . .

"It is coming," said Vera to herself. "What am I to do?"

She was sitting with Captain Dunbar in the winter garden, among the palms and the Chinese lanterns. For two hours she had been quite, quite sure that she loved him; and now, when the cup of her happiness should have been full, she was sick with apprehension. "It is coming," she said; "it is coming. What am I to do?"

And then, in another region of her mind she began to wonder how it would come. He was not a master of words.

He changed his position awkwardly several times, and jerked out a few staccato sentences of no particular bearing.

"How fresh you have kept your roses!" he said abruptly. "No other woman in the room has that particular gift."

She touched the flowers caressingly. "No other

woman in the room has flowers that were chosen with such care."

"Well, that is true. I was awfully pleased when I saw you wearing them. Queer colour, aren't they?"

"Delicious. Shall we go back to the salon?"

"I was in doubt between that and white, but——"

Vera laughed nervously. "Oh, I am glad you chose this. I hate white. White is for—good little girls. Perhaps I ought to explain to you, Captain Dunbar,"—she raised her head with a pretty, deprecating gesture,—"that this is not my first ball."

"Not like white?" he said, surprised. "Why, white is your very own colour. Vera, Vera,—the name is a crystal. I often think our godfathers and godmothers at our baptism are gifted with a kind of prophetic insight. It doesn't always come off, of course; but that is more than you can claim for the best of prophets."

"No; it doesn't always come off," said Vera reflectively. "I had a chambermaid in Switzerland last summer as round and red as a rosebud. I should have called her Haidenröslein; but no: her name was Apollonia. Then wasn't there a city clerk who rejoiced in the name of Marcus Aurelius Snooks?"

"Don't," he said simply. Her flippancy jarred on him. His voice was a little hoarse. "Don't. It is the most beautiful name in the world, and the most appropriate."

Vera opened her lips to speak, but he stopped her.

"You know what I want to say," he exclaimed desperately. "Well, that's—that's why. I admired your beauty and wit and fun from the first; but then I saw you were straight and transparent as sunlight.

Vera," he repeated in a reverent whisper, "Vera, *Vera!*"

But she had sprung to her feet, her beauty all gone to ashes.

"Stop," she said. "Stop. Don't go on. I am ill. Take me to Mrs Trevithick!"

CHAPTER XIX.

DEATH AND LIFE.

It was about five in the morning when she awoke. Certain that she would not sleep, she had left the light burning; and it was with a dreary sense of surprise that she looked at her watch. There was no gradual realization this time of what had happened. She woke with the recollection weighing like lead on her mind, and she saw it in its ugliest, most worldly light. What was the use of being all she was if she had not the strength of purpose to carry anything through? What was the use of striving to perfect her life, if, just as the buds were opening, she plucked them with her own ruthless hand? "If only I was a pirate on the high seas,—with no claim, no right, no wish, for a respectable reputation!"

The situation was not final. She had only to plead a woman's right to be nervous and hysterical, and all might be as it was before. "Bah!" she said, "how I hate hysterical women!" If, on the other hand, she stood to her guns, she sacrificed not only a good man's love, but also a good woman's friendship: she proclaimed herself a heartless flirt; for to say she had not encouraged Captain Dunbar was the idlest falsehood. "I hate flirts," said Vera. "I am none, I am none.

How faithful and true I could be if life would give me a chance! Oh, the happy, happy people who are able to be true!"

Then the cynical mood came uppermost. "Are there not plenty of virtues that you should cry—like a child for the moon—after the two that lie out of your reach? Yet how good it must be to be 'straight and transparent as sunlight'! I *will* be straight and transparent as sunlight in everything, save only this. Oh, Giles Willoughby, Giles Willoughby! May the Fates exact some day from you every jot and tittle of what I have suffered. I hate you—I hate you—I hate you! If it were not for you, what woman would have had so beautiful a life as I? And now, wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

She rose from her bed to open the window wider. "Well, friend," she said, "which is it going to be — neurotic or flirt? *Je vous félicite des deux rôles!*"

As she spoke, her eyes fell for the first time on an unopened black-edged letter. With the involuntary reflection that there was no one on earth whose death would affect her greatly, she returned to bed to read the letter in comfort.

"DEAR MISS CARRUTHERS,—

"It is many years since I had any tidings of you; but I think you may not have forgotten your Father's old friend. I am sending this letter through your man of business, as I do not know where you are. You will be shocked to hear that Mrs Carruthers died rather unexpectedly last night. The illness was not in itself a serious one; but her heart has been weak

for years, and the doctor says death was due to syncope.

"Her sister, Miss Anderson, was fortunately in the house at the time of the sad event, and she is taking care of the four children. They will be left, I fear, very poorly off, as Mrs Carruthers, in her ignorance of business, has been drawing pretty extensively on capital; but Miss Anderson (though herself not a rich woman) is, I believe, prepared, with a little pecuniary help from you, to undertake their upbringing and education. I have no doubt you will be satisfied with this arrangement, though I understand that, from a legal point of view, you—as your Father's nearest surviving relative—have the first claim to the guardianship of the children.

"Miss Anderson is a most conscientious and religious woman, and she will, I have no doubt, do all in her power for the welfare of the family.

"You will, of course, receive full intimation, and all necessary information, from the proper quarter; but I thought it well to give you some idea how the matter stands.

"With very cordial greetings, I am

"Yours very truly,

"JOSHUA SMITH."

It is impossible to describe the effect of this letter upon Vera. It found her in a *cul-de-sac*, where her own career seemed to have come to an end; or rather, it caught her in a moment of rebound from her own personality. Even in the lives of the most selfish there come moments of longing for deliverance. "Here is my chance," she thought. "The labour I take with myself is 'as the climbing up a sandy way

to the feet of the aged.' Henceforth the children shall be my self, my *ego*. All that I have learned and achieved I will pour into them. I will make of them all that I never could make of myself. I believe, I do believe, they will love me. They shall be to me as clay in the hands of the potter."

A line from Omar Khayyam went drifting through her mind—

"Who *is* the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?"

but, fortunately for the illusions of youth, it failed to link itself on to her line of thought.

In another moment her mind was teeming with plans, some high and visionary, some almost grotesquely practical. She thought of the lofty ideal she would impress upon the children's minds, till the conception was chased away by an anxious forecast of the butcher's bill.

"Oh, what lucky, lucky children they will be!" she said, and she sprang from bed once more to begin a new life.

"So flirt has it," she thought rather ruefully a few minutes later, as her eye fell on the roses she had forgotten to put into water. "And yet—and yet, they will not call me a flirt. Here at last is a fact in my life of which I need make no mystery. My stepmother is dead; my little brothers and sisters are left all but penniless. Everyone will think it natural if I take them up." Her face clouded. "They will think that is my only motive; they will think me better than I really am. 'Straight and transparent as sunlight.' Oh, I want to be true, and I can't, I can't! There is nothing in all the world so beautiful as truth. I will be true in everything save only this."

An expression of mingled relief and awe came over her mobile face.

"And now," she said solemnly, "the past is past. There shall be no more remorse, no faltering, no looking back. Vera Carruthers is dead. What she was matters nothing now."

PART III.

CHAPTER XX.

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

Miss Anderson raised a moist handkerchief to her eyes. "Well, I can only hope that the children will never rise up to reproach you for what you have done."

"You don't seem to see," said Vera quietly but wearily, "that the question is one of principle. You seem to consider religion and principle coextensive. Besides, it is the law which has settled the question, not I."

"The law does not create a complete breach between the children and me."

"No; it leaves that for me to decide. It is the only way to avoid unceasing friction. If the law had handed them over to you——"

"Yes; what would you have done then?"

"I should have accepted the conclusion loyally. I should have realized that your influence and mine were incompatible, and simply vacated the field."

"But what injury am I likely to do them? If religion is a mere superstition, what harm can it do them."

"I don't want them to grow up sentimental and introspective. You force me to speak plainly."

"If this little life be all, what can it matter?"

"Don't you think it matters all the more? We know

little, and there is not much that we can do; but we can at least meet fate bravely and gallantly."

"It is easy to talk like that when one is rich and young and flattered."

Vera laughed. "Those are qualifications that every day will help to modify,—particularly the first."

"Yes; when you tire of your—whim, let me know."

Vera was not listening. Her face had flushed unaccountably. "Do you know," she said with an effort, "I believe I said what was not true just now? I said I should simply have vacated the field. I don't suppose I should have done so absolutely."

"Now, you see!" Miss Anderson was eager to press the concession home. "It is only when we turn a thing round that we see it in its true bearings. I ask so little, —only to live near the children and to have them with me for a few hours a week."

"No," said Vera with emphasis. "I grant you my inconsistency for all it is worth; but I grant you nothing more. I should not have opposed your teaching directly. I should have tried to keep their intellects alive, that's all."

"And you won't allow me to keep their spiritual nature alive. They have been much moved by their mother's death. They are in a softened and susceptible mood."

"Yes; it is natural that they should be taking a morbid, one-sided view of life for the moment. That will pass."

Miss Anderson clenched her hands to keep back the indignant words. "Oh," she said, "it is useless to talk. One can only hope that some day you will see. I can only pray for them and for you——"

"I forgot," said Vera. "You have that consolation.

You are better off than I should have been had the situation been reversed. You can pray for them, and you can hope that I shall 'see'. I *know* you never will 'see'. Goodbye."

There was no response, and she left the room. In the passage she paused irresolute. Then she heard a stifled sob. A minute later she retraced her steps to find her antagonist still sitting in the same place, her head resting in uttermost dejection on her outstretched arms.

"Forgive me," Vera said. "Life is hard enough for all of us without my paining you more than need be. I did not mean to when our talk began. I don't know why it is so difficult not to be cold and flippant when one talks of these things. Let me sit down now and try to tell you something of what I plan. I shall teach the children nothing negative. I will try to make them brave and true, but I shall leave them to form an opinion for themselves in matters that are great and difficult. That is what their father would have wished. It is scarcely just to describe it as my 'whim.' I will try to keep on growing all the time that I may be more equal to the trust; it would be miserable if they were the witness of constant dissensions between you and me." She hesitated and wavered. She felt a degree of compunction for which she was unable to account, and she could not help wanting even Miss Anderson to like her. "I must have the children for a year; but since you care about it so much, we will reopen the question then. From your point of view no great harm will be done. The methods of science are nothing if not slow. Your 'conversion' can be effected in a moment."

"Thank God!"

There was real feeling in the words; but a moment later the speaker threw away her advantage. "Do you really believe," she said, raising tear-stained eyes, "that you will have the perseverance to go on for a year?"

"If not," said Vera quietly, "we are surely wasting breath. You would not grudge me my year." In her heart she was glad to have one incentive more. "Whatever happens now," she said to herself, "there must be no looking back."

CHAPTER XXI.

"WHO *IS* THE POTTER, PRAY, AND WHO THE POT?"

It certainly was a duck-pond to fire the imagination. Not one of those clear limpid pools, devoid of mystery, which allow you to see every pebble at the bottom. Nothing of the sort. The bottom was of black slime, and the water inky and forbidding to uninitiated eyes. It was impossible to guess what loathsome forms of life might not lie hidden beneath its impenetrable surface. There was a sloping beach by which the ducks could waddle in, but the remaining sides were built up with stone, forming at the back a "cliff" some three feet in height above the surface of the water. The cliff was full of caves and crevices, for most of the mortar and some of the stones had been washed away by the rain.

Here, on the scrubby grass, the children were wont to lie prone, with head and arms projecting over the edge, gazing down on the sleek broad backs below.

It is wonderful how much character ducks have when you really get to know them; and the character is demonstrated with surprising force if you send out among them a wooden raft laden with a portion of the savoury boiled potatoes and oats which Kirsty provides for their mid-day meal.

Of course the raft is not sent adrift till Kirsty is

well out of sight, for an exciting skirmish is apt to end in a total loss of supplies. It is amusing then to watch the creatures dive after their vanished treasure, but how much of it they really succeed in saving no human being will ever know.

There comes a time, however, when no inducement is sufficient to keep the ducks in the pond, and then you must either wander off to byre and stable and granary, or resort to a commonplace form of make-believe.

To-day the June sun was hot, and the children were too lazy to move.

"*Mighty cliffs towered above the surface of the water,*" said Judith dreamily.

"*And the waves dashed against them with a sullen, dauntless roar.*"

"Oh, I say, 'dauntless' is fine!"

"Make waves, can't you, Eric? You've got a switch. Call that dauntless? No, no; draw it mild, or we'll have a shipwreck to start with."

"*The pirate chief stood moody and alone on the deck of his vessel.* Stop a bit. Let's find a pirate chief."

A stumpy bit of wood was the only available representative, but Aline provided a pin to which it could be spliced. Without that addition, the chief could never have "stood moody" in such a sea.

"*His men were asleep below——*"

"Then I'll thank you to put them there," said Harold, surveying in disgust the wooden raft which had been promoted to the proud position of pirate ship. "You can't 'sleep below' in a ship of two dimensions."

"*——in the stern,*" Judith corrected herself hastily. "*And he had no wish to wake them.*"

"More fool he under the circumstances. They'd have been better employed in washing this beastly wet potato off the decks. And who do you suppose was at the helm?"

"*He must be within a few hundred yards of the hidden treasure,*—where are those gorgeous beads of yours, Aline? *If only he could find it, he would be the owner of untold wealth.*"

"*The night was growing dark, and he could only dimly see the mysterious outline of the caves. Suddenly*——"

"——*above the noise of the waves*——No, no; don't overdo it, Eric!"

"——*he fancied he heard a piercing cry. At that moment the moon looked out from behind a cloud*——"

"——*and he beheld at the mouth of a cave*——"

"Oh, I say,—captive princess business! Hurry up, Aline! Give us one of your dolls."

"I can't!" cried generous Aline in dismay.

"Nonsense! Look alive. Don't you see we must have it? Poke back the ship a bit from the cliff, Eric."

"There's Hephzibah,—the broken one," said Judith in a stage whisper. "She will do."

Ruefully Aline rummaged in a basket by her side, and produced a penny china doll. It had lost an arm, and in its palmiest days had never possessed a neck; but she loved it, and no doll ever went to meet a more uncertain fate.

"Well, of all the one-horse princesses!" said Harold in disgust. "Never mind. Hand over. I'll get her into the cave."

"You can't!" shrieked Aline. "She's got nothing on!"

"Never mind."

"Give her to me!" said Judith. "Let me see.

What were we at? Oh, I remember. *He beheld at the mouth of the cave the loveliest woman he ever—ever—saw.*"

A shout of derision greeted the anticlimax, but Judith was too busy to pay attention. Wrapping the doll in a silky red poppy leaf, she tied it round with a blade of grass. "*A crimson robe fell in great folds from her shoulders*——"

"*And a scarf of matchless beauty encircled her waist.*"

"*One lovely arm*——" proceeded Harold mockingly.

"Well, bairns," said Vera's pleasant voice. "Tell me all about it."

The eager faces fell. Harold sprang to his feet shamefacedly. "Of all the awful rot!" he said. This was his favourite apology for his delicious brotherly relapses into childishness. He put his hands in his pockets and walked away, whistling.

Aline's comforting little hand stole softly into Vera's, and she looked up with smiling eyes. But as to telling a grown person what the game was about—why, it was all in an unknown language.

Poor Vera! With the best intentions in the world, she was an Olympian after all!

Few things turn out exactly as we anticipate in life; but in the conflict and combination of personalities it may be fairly said that nothing ever does turn out as we anticipate. Strong in the sense that she was sacrificing much for these children, Vera had been prepared to take royal possession; but the first half-hour of intercourse had convinced her that this was impossible. It was not only, nor mainly, that they had been prejudiced against her. They came to her clothed in black, with the aura of the Valley about them, so to

speak, and she was constrained to stand back. Their talk and their games were often ridiculously childish; but, just as she had convinced herself that they were mere children after all, they turned to her a shadow side so full of mystery that she was baffled. It was her instinct to talk of the dear ones she had lost,—to recall their goodness, even their foibles; but the children had been taught to speak of their father with bated breath; of their mother they could not be persuaded to speak at all. Vera knew, even from the dead woman's friends, that latterly she had been arbitrary, severe, unreasonable, but she never would have gathered this from the children. She tried sometimes to get more into touch with them by the obvious method of asking questions, but the attempt only forced her to realize the inwardness of Wordsworth's poem:—

"At Kilve there was no weathercock;
And that's the reason why."

On the other hand, with eight solemn eyes upon her, she became more keenly conscious of her own shortcomings. She succeeded in striking a high note to begin with, and then felt the effort of living up to it. To her own naïve surprise, the love seemed to be mainly on her side, and she saw that at first she must exercise a wise economy even in showing it. Well, she had set out to win her brothers and sisters, and win them she would. In the meantime they all behaved to her with a pretty respect, and Harold often treated her with a boyish chivalry that filled her with hope.

She felt acutely the duty of being equable, but how is a pagan girl to accomplish that after which saints and philosophers have too often striven in vain? Once and again, when she thought of the freedom

of the past, and when the necessity for adaptation became too galling, she was swept off her feet by a whirlwind of passion that left her exhausted and ashamed. To do the children justice, they never took advantage of these outbursts. They seemed to think that something of the kind was only to be expected of their elders.

And yet the little *ménage* was a successful one on the whole. Vera had been fortunate in finding an old farmhouse with a non-resident farmer, who, in consideration of the hardness of the times, was glad to let at a moderate rent. There was a good sea-port and market-town at a distance of two or three miles, and an excellent educational centre a little farther off. The place struck her as being "in the heart of the country," and she settled down happily to the prospect of knowing no one but the butcher and the postman.

She had far wider experience of the world than most women of her age, and she naturally did not realize that she was entering upon a life of which she had no experience at all. The "heart of the country" seems to the casual observer as placid and empty as a drop of stagnant water, but, settle down to live in the midst of it, and you have put the drop of water under a microscope, so to speak. Life appears in varied forms out of nothingness, and what was a mere speck becomes a formidable personality.

Two classes only of newcomers were recognized in the neighbourhood,—those who came armed with due credentials, and were forthwith called upon by the county, and those who settled down without introduction, and crept into modest social relations through the friendly medium of the kirk or the meeting-house.

Vera might have belonged to either of these classes. She deliberately elected to belong to neither, and, in doing so, of course, she reckoned without her host. She had learned that the way of peace lay in escaping observation, and she did not know that in the country parishes of Scotland in those days no one could escape observation who did not go to church.

We often say that youth fails to see the magnitude of the task it has undertaken, but surely we are wrong. What youth mercifully fails to see are the *details* of the task. From below the foreshortened track looks clear as a ribbon; but, as we ascend, how it bristles with difficulties, and often seems to vanish altogether!

For the first few weeks Vera was very busy putting her house in order. The farmer called it a furnished house, but she certainly described it more aptly as the "skeleton of a furnished house"; and she keenly enjoyed the process of putting flesh on its bones. Indeed, she was glad of a task that called out her ordinary faculties to honest hard work, for the breaking-off of her ties in Brussels had involved an emotional strain on which she did not yet venture to look back. Mrs Trevithick had been disposed at first to treat the situation very airily. "My dear, I have no intention of entering into an argument," she had said. "Talk it out with Captain Dunbar. He is quite capable of fighting his own battles. But you must *see* him. After all that has come and gone you would not be such a coward as to escape with a letter."

So Vera set her teeth, and prepared to go through with the task. She felt strong as a rock to withstand Captain Dunbar's reproaches, but the first half-minute of the interview changed all that. He brought

with him into the room a blast of sheer determination and virility that set her trembling like a reed. How she withstood it she never knew. At first he was playful, gentle, caressing; but, as he began to realize that he could not move her, he broke into a tempest of scorn and anger, and threw at her words that cut like knives.

Then at last calmness returned to her,—absolute calmness. Drawing herself to her full height, she turned a fine ashen face up to his.

"Have done!" she said in a low voice tense with feeling. "It is true. I am not a good woman. Now will you leave me in peace, and torture me no more?"

What happened after that she did not know; what impression he carried away she could only guess. In any case her credit was safe, drearily safe, in his hands, and the credit of her sex had sunk in his estimation for evermore. The woman of his choice had proved at best a heartless flirt.

Come what might, she must not risk an experience like that again. She must live in a corner and know no one save the children and the poor folk round about. No man yet had looked upon her as a sister, so she must simply have done with men. But for the children, she had better have gone into a nunnery outright.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PARISH MINISTER.

"If you please, Miss, that is Mr Bartlett, the parish minister."

Vera turned pale. She had overlooked the fact that there were such institutions as parish ministers. She must refuse to see him, of course, and yet,—would it not be better to be interviewed once for all, and explain what her aims and anticipations really were? True to her principle of "taking the day by the horns," she mustered her courage and went downstairs.

The minister was a big, kind, burly-looking man with an honest smile. Vera had certainly not been brought up with any superstitious reverence for the cloth, but she felt an instinctive regret that she could not avail herself of his friendship. No matter: that was one of the things in life that must simply be foregone.

"Entbehren sollst du, sollst entbehren—"

He was accustomed to take the burden of the conversation, so her task was an easy one; but, of course, every word, every gesture, every silence was the word, the gesture, the silence of a cultured woman, and he became more interested in her each moment.

"And what brought you to this part of the country?" he said at last. "Have you friends

here?" Of course he was well aware that nobody claimed her acquaintance.

"No," said Vera. "That is why I came. I don't wish to make acquaintances. I want to give myself up entirely to the education of my brothers and sisters. The oldest will go to school, but I can't afford to send the others, even if I wished it."

The minister looked at her with a shrewd enigmatical smile. "Well, now that you are settled, I hope we shall have the pleasure of seeing you all at church."

She could not have believed that her answer would involve so great an effort. "I am afraid not," she said simply.

"You are a dissenter?"

"No. Well, yes—" she smiled. "I never thought of myself in that light, but I suppose I am. My father was a man of science."

The minister's smile was very fatherly. "And is science incompatible with church-going?"

She found an unexpected difficulty in answering the question. "I don't think it would be very honest on my part to go to church, and—to tell the truth—the temptation hitherto has not been very strong." There was just the shadow of a graceful compliment in the "hitherto."

"And what about these young brothers and sisters in whom you are so interested?"

"I don't say anything to dissuade them from going to church."

"But, my dear young lady, is not this a matter in which example is everything?"

She smiled. "There are so many bogies in life without making one of Example. Besides, they had their mother's example for years."

"She was a religious woman, then?"

"Yes."

"Poor thing, poor thing! Don't you think you are taking a *very* heavy responsibility?"

"I am not afraid of responsibility," said Vera bravely. "In any case, it does not all rest on my shoulders. The elder children remember their father's teaching very well. I honestly don't know *what* they think of these things. I suppose we all have a 'buried life' of some kind, and I act on the conviction that even a child's buried life is its castle."

"And do you mean to say they gave up church-going the moment they were not compelled to go?"

"Well, you see," said Vera honestly, "that element in their lives had been frightfully overdone, poor mites. They were *always* at church, and their memories are a regular 'sausage-book of chopped-up Bible.'"

He looked at her with grave dignity, and she felt ashamed of the flippant remark, notwithstanding its distinguished source.

"That is a good thing," he said quietly.

"Is it?" She threw back her head with her little gesture of proud defiance. "There are glorious things in the Bible—glorious, but do those children see them? Not a bit. The most wonderful poetry and battle-music has been made a mere hackneyed form of words to them. And it is not want of power of appreciation. You should hear them read Longfellow and Poe."

"But it will come back to them, it will come back to them."

"Will it? I don't know. I am interested to see." Obviously she spoke the truth. Her face had assumed the childlike expression of which sorrow seemed unable

to rob her, the expression of one "looking forth on life with the young eyes of heathen wonder."

"And don't you read the Bible with them at all?"

"All my books are at their disposal. As a matter of fact, I should think they have any number of Bibles of their own. But I am sure the best thing they can do is to forget the Bible for a year or two, and come back to it with a fresh mind."

He shook his head. "In my last children's sermon I was telling the bairns the story of a boy whose father sent him to fetch water in a basket. Over and over again he returned with it empty, but each time his father sent him back. At last the boy said, 'Why do you send me so often? I never can bring the water in this.' 'True,' said the father: 'but do you not see how clean the basket has grown?'"

Vera smiled: she tried not to laugh. "It is a patriarchal view of education, isn't it?" she said.

The minister rose to go. His eye rested with fresh interest on the books and pictures, the artistically arranged flowers, and he wondered how she meant to live up to this level with only a maid-of-all-work.

"That was a nice sensible-looking woman who opened the door to me," he said. "Does she belong to this part of the country?"

"Her home is some ten miles off." Vera was glad to find herself on neutral ground. "Oh, she is the comfort of my life, and I fell in with her in rather a curious way. I was travelling down to make arrangements about this house, and I noticed in a general way that there was a sonsy, sensible-looking woman in the carriage. At a wayside station a man got in who was just a little the worse for liquor. He took an empty pipe from his mouth and began to fill it in a very business-

like way. 'Excuse me,' I said, 'this is not a smoking carriage.' A *gaucherie* on my part, wasn't it? Well, he made the most of it. 'And who said I was going to smoke?' he asked rudely. I backed out, of course, but he wouldn't let me alone. He repeated the question, edging nearer in a very uncomfortable way. 'Who said I was going to smoke? I had ta'en the pipe frae my mouth——' Suddenly, in the opposite corner, a deliverer arose. 'Weel, ye'd better shut your mouth noo that the pipe's out o' it.' It was magnificent."

"And how did he take it?"

"Take it? He collapsed. From that moment I had no farther trouble. He had no eyes for any one but her. I never saw such whole-hearted admiration in my life. He wanted to see her home, but unfortunately I had designs on her too by that time, and here she is."

She told the little story with a combined force and simplicity that amazed the minister. A light hand in conversation was not a common gift in that part of the country. Altogether he went away in a mood of great perplexity. It was difficult to see where his duty lay. He was not even quite a free agent in the matter, for it so happened that his wife was a thoroughly worldly woman. It was absurd to take so young and pretty a woman as Miss Carruthers seriously; and yet there was no getting over the fact that she was a householder, and the legal guardian of the children. The case was completely out of his beat; and he was almost as much taken aback as was the worthy priest who found himself accosted in the confessional with the astounding words, "*Mon père, je suis protestante.*"

A young woman's face may go far to atone for the audacity of her words, and the minister's feeling for

Vera was a kindly one; but he had to say something when people questioned him about her, and, by no ill-will of his, the refraction she underwent in passing through his temperament did not add to her attractiveness in the eyes of the world that judged her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CHILDREN.

The children had been playing "bear" in the wood adjoining the farm. It was a glorious evening for a romp in the mellow light over the crisp aromatic pine-needles; but long before the enthusiasm of the others had cooled, Harold grew tired of the game.

"Let's go for a walk," he said to Judith. "No; you small fry can do something else."

Judith's face flushed with pleasure. After Sir Philip Sidney, Harold was her hero.

For a long time they talked of their "plans,"—those delicious plans, aglow with a light as elusive as the tints of the rainbow,—then, as the sun was setting, they climbed a great pile of straw, and lay full length with young eyes fixed on the sky.

There was a long silence. From far, far away came the plaintive sound of a church-bell.

Judith heaved a deep sigh. "This sort of night,—" she said.

"Well?"

"—always makes me think of Mother."

"Does it?"

"Do you know, Harold, I wonder whether it *can* be right not to go to church."

"Father never went to church."

"I know,—but so many people do."

"I remember saying to him once, when I was a kid, that servants and uneducated people always seemed to believe the Bible."

"And what did he say?"

"Nothing. He sort of smiled."

"Betsy thinks it's awful our not going to church."

"She didn't go herself last Sunday. I believe it has only just occurred to her that there isn't a law on the subject."

"Vera says Father was a very good man."

Harold laughed. "I should just think he was."

"And Vera is good, though she is queer, and Mother never liked her. Don't you think so?"

Harold hesitated. "She's *nice*," he said judicially at last.

"And when you think of Jonah and the whale, it does seem rather—ridiculous."

"It's not only Jonah and the whale," said Harold, rousing himself. "Do you remember when Mother used to read us Kitto on Sunday evenings?"

"Yes."

"Well, do you remember he gave a lot of other versions of the 'Story of the Fall'? They were all awfully like the Bible story, and some of them just as good. Why should we pick out one, and say it is inspired by God, while the others are just nothing? I nearly said so to Mother; but she would only have sent me to bed."

"And there used to be buns for supper on Sunday night," mused Judith pensively.

There was another silence. "Do you know," said Judith, "Aline still says her prayers."

"Don't you?"

"Well, kind of. I sometimes say them in bed. Do you?"

"Mother made me promise, so I've got to. I wonder she didn't make you promise too."

"You see she never thought she was going to die, and I suppose she thought Aunt Annie would bring us up. Do you know Vera found me reading that book Aunt Annie sent me on my birthday? I think she thought it was silly."

"What did she say?"

"She just smiled, and said, 'A children's book!'"

"So it is," said Harold with contempt. "Give me Scott and Dickens. I can't think why Mother never would let us read novels."

"She was awfully kind, too, Harold, Mother was, when she wasn't cross. Do you remember——?"

And then for a time with moist eyes they exchanged their pitiful little memories.

"Oh, yes; she was kind," Harold said. "I would say my prayers, if I were you, Judith. It would please her if she knew, and it can't do you any harm; but of course you needn't tell Vera."

"All right," said Judith obediently, "I will. I wonder what Eric thinks about it all?"

"Do you know I can't guess. He's awfully close about these things is Eric, for all he is such a kid."

"Yes."

"The fact is," Harold concluded philosophically, "Mother belonged to a time that is past."

"And Father?"

"Oh, Father"—his face glowed. "Father belonged to the future!"

Up to this time, much to her own surprise, Vera

was still mainly occupied in looking on. The children were not very remarkable, but they took her breath away. She had to all intents and purposes been an only child, and she did not allow for the extent to which iron sharpens iron. She felt, too, the undesirability of coming into direct collision with their home teaching. Better let the ground lie fallow for a long summer. It would respond all the more surely when the time came.

There were other excellent reasons for allowing the ground to lie fallow. The children came to her overstrained in emotion, and in the effort to be as emotional as the occasion demanded. Their general health had suffered, and there were various ailments, such as "glands," fits of stammering, and night terrors, to be overcome. So lessons were laid aside altogether, and they were allowed to run wild from morning to night.

The many interests of the farm opened up a new life to them. They talked learnedly of the rotation of crops, the different varieties of clover, the points of a good cow. They knew by the look of the wool when a sheep was out of condition, and the threshing-machine had scarcely begun to "boom" before they were primed with information about governor-balls and pistons and less comprehensible things. Vera had meant to answer their questions; she was conscientiously reading *The Book of the Farm;* but, with a fine instinct, the children preferred as a rule to apply to the labourers direct. She had looked forward to teaching them to observe; but it seemed they were teaching her; and she realized with a little stab of pain that what they mainly wanted from her was food and clothing. On wet days they pored over her books and asked endless questions about her pictures; and

yet nothing was turning out just as she had anticipated. Plastic they were assuredly, responding to every stimulus from without; but they always seemed to respond in a way she had not foreseen. Clearly they were governed by the law of their own development. Her Spencer should have prepared her for this, but it was a surprise nevertheless.

She was amazed too, on the whole, at their goodness. Life was so full of well-being and of fresh interests that they scarcely knew what wishing meant. Castle-building became a thing of the past in a world where castles were always appearing by magic in the night. From the time the harvest began, their life was a dream of delight. They rode to the fields in the empty carts, they helped to bind the sheaves, they thought the shearer's bread and ale the most delicious food they had ever tasted, and they blossomed into a wealth of physical beauty that was a joy to behold.

All the conditions of life were calculated to put their precocious ethical faculty to sleep, and, just because she did not force it upon them, they drifted the more surely into their elder sister's view that pleasure is the end of life. "But we must not spoil it," Vera would say, "by being selfish." Strange to say, Aline, who, under the old *régime*, had been the most religious of the children, was most susceptible to the new teaching. She was one of those who take their colour in a surprising degree from their environment.

Vera had no intellectual doubts about the satisfactoriness of the utilitarian theory of morals, and she had not yet learnt that the theory of life which we are prepared accurately to formulate is apt to be a stage behind the view of life on which we act. So there was a breezy inconsistency about her incidental precepts.

Her admiration for a heroic deed bore little relation to its use; and the wine of her teaching on the subject of truthfulness put a heavy strain on the bottles in which she enclosed it.

Looking from the window one day, she saw Judith running towards the house with a basket of eggs in her hand: a few minutes later the child entered the room, looking white and scared.

"What's the matter?" asked Vera.

"Nothing."

"Sure?"

"Quite sure." And Judith began to sing, and presently danced out of the room.

All day she was very quiet, and even her appetite failed. Vera resolved to let her have a night of remorse; but, on the way to her own room, she heard a restless movement and a stifled sigh. She went in, and sat down by Judith's bed.

"Well, old girl, it wasn't worth it, was it?"

Two hot little arms were thrown round her neck. "Oh, Vera, Vera, I broke two eggs, and I told a lie!"

"It seemed a help at the time, didn't it? But *what* a fraud it turned out? Judith, dear, don't lie ever, ever. Hold your head high, and live royally."

"I won't do it ever again."

"And, if you do, own up though it kills you. No matter how great a fool you make of yourself. It is the only way."

"I believe God sent you, Vera. I was praying——"

Vera felt as if a slight electric shock had passed through her. "When it is a question of a lie or of a bit of meanness," she said, "don't stop to think about it, or to pray. Treat it as you would a spider on your naked arm. *Shake it off!*"

"Do you think I must tell Kirsty?"

"That depends on how brave you are. Good-night, dear girl."

In the middle of her own room Vera stopped short with clenched hands. "Happy little Judith with her shriven soul! . . .

"*But alas, alas, for my own vineyard!*"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DORCAS MEETING.

"WELL, all I can say is," said Mrs Bartlett, laying down her work, "that her parents have a great deal to answer for."

"I call it simply outrageous," said a rather angular lady.

The doctor's wife held up a piece of smocking, and regarded it with a critical eye. "Adds a new terror to life, doesn't it?" she observed half absently.

"To think that it should happen in a Christian land!" said benevolent-looking Mrs Wright.

"With an open Bible before her!"

"Some one ought to give her a good talking-to," said the angular lady.

Mrs Raeburn, a young matron with a bright fair face, gathered courage at this point to intervene. "Do you think," she said with brave timidity, "that we know enough to judge?"

Mrs Bartlett looked at the speaker severely from above her spectacles. "It seems to me we know quite enough. Did you hear what she said when Mr Bartlett sent the children some books from the lending library?"

"No."

"That, until their taste was formed, she preferred that they should confine themselves to *literature*."

"And what were the books?"

"*Sunset in Provence*, and some of A.L.O.E.'s."

Comment from Mrs Raeburn was rendered needless by a chorus of "*Well!*"

"What she wants is a good setting-down."

Mrs Dunlop, the doctor's wife, looked up from her smocking. "It is a comfort," she said drily, "to think that that is the commodity which life is most sure to supply."

"Oh, no doubt she will live to regret it; but by that time the children's characters will be formed. 'Train up a child in the way he should go.'"

"I really think some one ought to speak to her," pursued the angular lady.

"Well, why not undertake it?"

"I think Mrs Bartlett should be the one."

Mrs Bartlett shrugged her shoulders. "I don't see that she is at all likely to come in my way. You can't call on people you know nothing about."

"But as the minister's wife——"

"As the minister's wife, I make it my duty to call on everyone who comes to church. My private circle is another thing. I confess I like to know something about the people I speak to."

This reasonable sentiment was greeted with a little chorus of assent.

"And this girl doesn't want to be called on, it seems."

"I wonder why," mused Mrs Wright.

"Perhaps she means to invite down friends of her own."

"Then I'd like to know where she means to put them up."

"Entertaining costs money, and she doesn't seem to be rich."

"*Rich!* She was in the butcher's the other day when I went in to pay my weekly bill—" At this point the speaker's voice sank to an undertone. Her quota of information was adapted only to the ears of a select few.

It was some minutes before the conversation came above ground again.

"Depend upon it," said Mrs Bartlett, "there is something wrong somewhere. I don't believe in smoke without fire. There's always water where there's turkeys drowned. Is it likely that she wouldn't wish to make acquaintances unless there was a good reason?"

"But I thought I understood," said a timid voice, "that she is an *atheist?*"

"If she is an atheist, depend upon it the mischief hasn't stopped there. Pull one stick out of the bundle, and the rest will all fall through."

"One *stick!*" said Mrs Wright, with genuine feeling. "And if the stick be the whole lynch-pin of life?"

"In any case we need seek for no further explanation. She must know that we don't wish our children to associate with atheists."

Mrs Dunlop laughed. "I am not partial to atheists," she said; "but as her father was one before her, it is not likely that she is sensitive on that score. I expect she rather plumes herself on her 'philosophical position.' It is much more probable that she thinks we are not clever and cultured enough to be worth her while." There was just a touch of personal feeling in the remark. Mrs Dunlop felt that she had sacrificed a good deal in giving up her intellectual interests in Edinburgh for—such conversation as this. "I shouldn't wonder in the least if Lady Laurie takes her up. She isn't bowed

down by the weight of her orthodoxy, and she loves eccentrics."

"Lady Laurie has often done imprudent and indefensible things," Mrs Bartlett answered severely; "but I have never known her encourage—impertinence."

When Mrs Bartlett pronounced "impertinence" in that tone, she made one feel that she had all but touched the bottom of the pit of iniquity.

The situation was becoming almost too acute, and kind Mrs Wright intervened. "I saw the children the other day," she said. "They certainly look the picture of health, and very happy."

"Poor little heathen lambs!"

"And their girl told my Susan that their eldest sister is most devoted to them."

"Well, I don't suppose it will do the smallest good, but I do think one of us should deliver our soul."

"Our common soul," said Mrs Dunlop *sotto voce.*

Mrs Raeburn took courage to speak again. "Souls are not so cheaply delivered," she said a little breathlessly. "If we are to deliver our souls, we must get to know Miss Carruthers, and find out what she is aiming at. We must win her friendship before we have any right to deliver our souls in a matter that, after all, is no affair of ours."

Mrs Wright looked at the speaker kindly. "Don't you think," she said in motherly fashion, "that it is wiser first to let her find out her mistake? She can't isolate herself in this way. We are members one of another."

"That is what I think. If she refuses to see me, I cannot help it. I mean to call."

Everyone looked up in surprise. Mrs Raeburn was young and shy, and only Mrs Wright appreciated her

moral force; but her husband was a man of mark in their small world, and his position was an argument that appealed to all.

"I *rather* think I shall call," said Mrs Dunlop dispassionately. "But there are so many claims on one's time."

"Well, I am sure it is very kind of you both. It seems asking a good deal that we should lay ourselves open to a snub from a mere girl like that."

The two volunteers were by no means the delegates the meeting would have chosen; but nothing more was said to dissuade them. It would at least be interesting to hear how they were received.

The conversation flagged after that, and a few minutes later the meeting closed with prayer.

Mrs Wright and Mrs Raeburn walked home together. The cheeks of the latter were burning still. "Oh," she said, "when I listen to talk like that, I say to myself,—'*Then has Christ died in vain!*'"

CHAPTER XXV.

"NOT AT HOME."

"THEN I'm to say ye're out; am I?" said Betsy with a sniff.

"No," reiterated Vera with patient insistence. "Say I am not at home. The lady will understand."

"Understand that ye're out or that ye're in?"

"Understand that *I am not at home*,—not receiving visitors."

"Do ye no think ye'd better tell her that yersel'?"

"Oh, Betsy, *do go*." Vera was losing patience. Betsy was a Scotch servant of the old school, equal to a modern staff of four. She washed, she ironed, she scrubbed, she cooked, she baked,—and she ruled her mistress with a rod of iron.

Vera was startled to hear a lengthy colloquy taking place at the door. When Betsy returned, the sniff had developed into a snort. "Weel," she said, "see when I'll do the like o' that again!"

"What happened?"

"Happened! she seemed rael pit out. She asked if ye was out for a walk like, or if ye was away from home."

"And what did you say?"

"Me! What would I say? I said [illegible]st the ae thing and then the tither, and then I said I [illegible]na know."

"Oh, Betsy, how could you?"

The sight of Vera's dismay mollified the termagant. "Weel," she said, "ye'd wonder. But when aince I'd got my tongue round the ae lee, it took quite kindly to a' the rest."

Betsy went down on her knees, and proceeded noisily to adjust the fire-irons. It would have relieved her feelings to swear or to give notice, but she dared not venture on the former indulgence, and the latter had not yet become the fashion. She could not have told why she liked Vera; but she did like her none the less, and she longed to see her mistress "respectit like the lâve." What was the meaning of this ridiculous whim about not seeing visitors? It just caused a talk, and brought a lot of young men about the place, pretending they'd lost their way, or wanted a glass of milk. Then Vera had a maddening way of simply ignoring her servant's ill-temper, instead of demanding an explanation. She chose to ignore it now.

"Mrs Raeburn," she said reflectively, looking at the cards. "Well, she's gone at any rate. You must see, Betsy, that my hands are full enough without wasting time over afternoon calls."

Betsy left the room, not deigning a reply; and a minute later a gust of autumn wind swept mournfully round the house. Vera stretched herself with a sigh of infinite weariness.

"Oh," she said, "I am so bored, so bored, so bored! Where in all the world shall I find strength to go on?"

There had been many threatenings of this mood, but for the first time it could not be evaded. What sort of life was this for a woman of her gifts? What

did it amount to anyway? Cheese-paring economy, intellectual isolation, stocking-darning!

She had told herself that there was no one in this quiet country place whose opinion could possibly matter to her, but she had to endure her quota of stabs and pinpricks none the less. Sometimes in a shop a lady would look at her askance, or she fancied that the farm-labourers and their wives were less respectful than their wont. Sometimes in the street, or in the old-fashioned coach, a man would glance at her with sudden interest, as though he would fain see more of the owner of that face; and it might be perhaps that she felt an absurd wish to see more of him, or at least to have him know how clever she was, how sympathetic, how "nice."

If she had married Captain Dunbar, she would now have been travelling about Europe, admired, flattered,—meeting cultured people everywhere,—becoming every day a more perfect thing. She would have had some one to anticipate her smallest wish, to admire her inconsequent moods, to worship her very faults. And now, what? She was deliberately educating herself out of everything that men had most admired in her. And for what? For four very ordinary children who took it all as a matter of course, who thought her too impulsive for so old a woman. *So old a woman!* It made her grey to think of their conception of her. If she had left them to their aunt, contenting herself with the easy *rôle* of Fairy Godmother, the children would have loved her better, and she would in the long run have influenced them more. It had all been amusing enough while it was new; but now the glamour was gone, and she must go on and on and on till she was old

and ugly, and men no longer gave her a second glance. She had taken such pride in her little home, and what did it amount to after all her labour? A commonplace little farmhouse, touched up here and there into tawdriness. What a fool she had been,—what an unutterable fool!

It was natural that in this mood Captain Dunbar should seem the most desirable of men,—his presence the one thing required to make life perfect. Going up to her sanctum, she threw herself on the cushions, and gave herself up to a tempest of pagan regret.

It was a queer little room. The children were seldom admitted to it; but Judith and Aline looked on it as a bit out of the Arabian Nights. The floor was polished and carpeted with one or two handsome rugs. There were no chairs,—only delicious cushions, and a quaint oak cabinet contained a few choice books and a good violin. From the ceiling hung a number of brilliant Eastern lamps. "This shall be my oasis," Vera had said. "And a nice kind of life it must be," she added now, "to which this could serve as an oasis!"

The violin had been untouched since her stepmother died; but she took it now from its case, and tuned it carefully. Then she placed it in position and began.

Her technical training was not very great; but she made it the vehicle for all the feeling it could carry. Simple plaintive airs seemed to quiver on the brink of tears, and the violin took on a voice that was almost human. It sobbed, it wept; it filled the house with such a longing as those homely old rooms could scarcely have known before.

" wer die Sehnsucht kennt,
s was ich leide—"

For once with her whole heart she let herself go.

Then by degrees there crept in a statelier tone. She had never accustomed the instrument to talk to her only of things like these. It spoke now with halting faith of—

> "The high that seemed too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
> The passion that left the earth to lose itself in the sky."

Was it anywhere—anywhere really—the greatness that echoed in the dauntless expectancy of this poor heart of hers?

Her face was very calm when she put the violin gently back into its case.

"Did we undertake this thing deliberately, and have we in our darkest moments the smallest intention of giving it up? No? Then at least, my friend, we won't *pule!*"

On the mat outside sat Aline, her eyes brimming over with tears.

"Vera," she sobbed, "why did you stop? I love you, I love you, Vera!"

A few yards farther off was Betsy, her eyes suspiciously dim. "I've redd up your drawers while you was fiddlin'," said she severely. "See and keep them right."

And so for that time the tyranny was overpast.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TAKEN BY STORM.

THE snow had fallen continuously for six and thirty hours, and the children were wild with glee. Traffic was stopped on the railway, telegraph wires were breaking down, animals in the fields were in danger of being frozen to death. Yes; it was all very dreadful, but, on the other hand, *something was happening*, and what could be more inspiriting than that?

"Ain't I just jolly glad that I got home from school first!" said Harold. "Why, it may be days and days before I can get back again."

"Oh, Harold, you ungrateful boy!" said Judith wistfully. "If only I were lucky enough to go to school, I should never want snow to keep me away."

"Just wait till you have tried it, madam. Oh, hang Horace!"

Judith was one of the cases, not infrequent in those days, of the devoted sister at home who tried to keep pace with her brother's reading at school or college; and the joy of Harold's Saturdays was just a little tempered by the persistency with which she dogged him round, book in hand, until he had thrown light on some passage which she and Vera had failed to construe. Vera's great idea was that the children should work at natural science as their father had done be-

fore them. She saw little use in the pursuit of dead languages; but Judith took to learning so easily and lightheartedly that there was no room for complaint. She seemed able to accomplish without over-exertion quite twice as much as the ordinary school-girl.

Lessons had begun in earnest a few months before, and, after the long summer's rest, the progress of the children was remarkable. It was a great encouragement to Vera to work hard, and she certainly spared herself in no way.

"Oh, I say," exclaimed Aline, bursting into the room, "do just come to the stair window. *You can't see a thing!*"

This seductive description caused a general stampede.

"What fun it will be playing bear after this! We can have a real snow hut."

"Yes, and we'll light a fire and see if it is true that the snow doesn't melt."

"Oh, you silly! You don't suppose it is as cold here as in the backwoods?"

Eric discreetly changed the subject. "I wonder how thick the ice is on the duck-pond. We'll make icebergs and send the pirates in search of the North Pole."

This suggestion was greeted with a little grunt of approval, for the Captive Princess game had long since reached a degree of perfection that was incompatible with further existence. "Hephzibah" had found a watery grave, but not before her understudy had been well qualified by the loss of several important members to undertake the part.

"You know we ought to be helping Vera," Aline said presently. "Come along."

It happened unfortunately that Betty had gone home for a day's holiday, and there was little prospect at

present of getting her back. Kirsty, the farm girl, had come in to light the fires and do the roughest part of the work; but Vera's hands were a good deal fuller than usual. Betsy or no Betsy, there must be an extra good dinner when Harold was at home.

"You have done so much already," she said with the rather laborious kindness which suggests an unreasonable temptation to be cross. "It is nearly time to set the table now. Who is going to do that?"

"I will."

"I will."

"Oh, Vera, since Betsy is away, *don't* you think we might have dinner in the kitchen?"

"It's so cosy!"

"And clean!"

"And you can see the farm and the road. There's nothing to be seen from the dining-room except the garden."

"Just for once, Vera!"

"*Let's!*"

Vera laughed and yielded. It was impossible to say what absurdity the children would not regard as a ploy. "But remember you must make the table even prettier than usual," she said.

The girls set to work with a will, while Harold sat on the dresser and criticised. Their task was just completed when Eric came rushing from his watch-tower at the top of the house.

"Oh, I say, *such* news!" he cried, breathless. "A carriage has stuck in the snow. The horse is dead beat, and can't move another inch. They have sent the groom to Dobbie's cottage. What *will* they do?" And, scarcely waiting to see the effect of his words, he hurried back.

Vera's heart stood still. The nearest occupied house was more than a mile away. If a carriage had stuck in the snow within a hundred yards of her home, she must offer its occupants shelter. The contingency would have been an unpleasant one at any time; but to-day,—with Betsy away, and dinner laid in the kitchen!

Spades were procured as quickly as possible, and by dint of heaving, and shovelling, and pushing, and pulling, and a great deal of shouting, the dog-cart reached the back of the farm.

Vera went to the door, very erect, almost queenly, in her working-dress. "Pray come in," she said with as much cordiality as she could muster. "You must be half frozen."

A man of about thirty-five, with a fine, clear-cut face, had sprung from the cart. He raised his hat with a look of frank appeal that was very disarming. "You are very kind," he said. "I am afraid we are taking your hospitality by storm." Then, turning back to the dog-cart, he lifted his companion to the ground.

In spite of her furs, the lady was blue with cold, but her smile was bright and cordial. "Perhaps we had better begin by introducing ourselves," she said. "I called on you some months ago,—Mrs Raeburn. This is my husband. And you, I think, are Miss Carruthers."

She held out her hand with a generous simplicity that went straight to Vera's heart.

"You would like a hot mash for the horse, I am sure," Vera said. "You will see to it, Dobbie, won't you? They are sure to have hot water in the bothy."

The groom led the horse away, and the others entered the house.

"It seems inexplicable that we should be in such

straits three miles from home, but the fact is,—we have been visiting friends at Castlehill, some twenty miles away. The snow seemed crisp and rather inviting when we started; but latterly every mile has increased our difficulties. We should have stopped at Braefoot, but it was of the first importance to my husband to get home to-day, and we hoped to push through."

"The worst of it is," he said quietly, looking out of the window in the hall, "that there does not seem the smallest prospect of our getting any farther."

There was something almost pitiful in the eloquence of Vera's face. One half of her so obviously longed to be rid of them; the other half held out such friendly arms.

Mrs Raeburn laughed. "Would you like to put us in the stable?" she said. "An hour ago we should have been thankful even for that."

Vera smiled and blushed. Clearly there was nothing for it but to throw down the barricades.

"I have a large staff of servants," she said, "comprised in the person of one maid-of-all-work; but she is snowbound at her home to-day. I hope you won't mind dining in the kitchen."

Mr Raeburn extended the hand that had held the reins. It was cramped with cold. "Dine in the kitchen?" he said. "It is simply the most inviting prospect of my life."

And indeed the old farmhouse kitchen was the finest room in the house,—high and roomy, with great rafters overhead. A collection of hams hung from mighty hooks, a patriarchal saut-kist stood by the ingle-neuk, and the whole place was spotless and bright as only Betsy's hands could have made it. The great fireplace radiated forth a promise of spice and savour that well-

nigh brought tears to half-frozen eyes, and in the midst of all this stood a table covered with spotless linen, and daintily adorned with sprays of dark green ivy. The Raeburns had been prepared for something unusual. They were taken by surprise.

"It is like a bit out of a fairy-book," said Mrs Raeburn, her face beaming over with joyousness and goodwill. "Lost in the snow—no hope of rescue—when, hey presto!—a snow-wreath gives way, and, instead of sinking to destruction, one finds oneself in a world of light and warmth and colour."

Her husband drew a long breath of content. "And we are going to take it all for granted," he said, "just as people do in the fairy-books. Tell me,—" he turned to Aline. "You have been in fairyland since I have. You don't apologize to the Fairy Queen, do you?"

Aline looked thoughtful. "I don't *think* so," she said seriously, conscientiously casting her mind over a wide range of bibliography, "but she sees you think it all very nice."

Mr Raeburn turned a pair of smiling, chivalrous eyes full upon Vera. "Ah, she can't fail to see much more than that," he said.

And so it came about that they all sat down with a simplicity and brotherliness that ought to be so common in this world of ours!

It was Judith's turn to wait, and she did it very deftly for her size, though the presence of visitors brought an unusual colour to her cheeks. There was some competition as to who should help her when help was needed, and the whole feast was carried on with an absence of pretension that was pretty to see. Vera had mulled some of the thin farmhouse ale, and a cup of delicious French coffee completed the repast.

Mr Raeburn turned to Aline again. "I think," he said, "it can't be a breach of etiquette to congratulate the Fairy Queen on her *cordon bleu*."

Vera smiled, well-pleased. It had all been very nice,—just the sort of simple dinner that a Frenchwoman understands so well; and the children could not have behaved better if she had coached them beforehand.

For herself,—it was a humiliating confession, but there was no denying that the presence of new people—sympathetic people—was like an elixir of life. She realized for the first time into what a rut of monotony and depression she had been sinking. Mrs Wright well might say, as a greater than she had said before her,—"We are members one of another."

CHAPTER XXVII.

SNOWED UP.

"THE minute I woke yesterday morning," Aline was saying excitedly, "I knew something was going to happen. You know the feeling one has? And you see I was right. First Harold came—well, I was expecting him—and then there was the snow; and to-day,—*you!*"

"I wish it would snow for days and weeks," chimed in Judith hungrily, "and then you couldn't get away. Do you know what you are like? You are like a draught of water in a thirsty land."

"We don't see many people here," Eric explained. "And now that Harold has gone to school——"

Vera's face flushed. She had caught the little conversation by accident as she entered the parlour. She had found out a good deal about children within the last year; but she had yet to learn how mercilessly they can give one away.

"It was a very friendly snowstorm that brought us here," said Mrs Raeburn warmly. "I think it is quite wrong that you should have anyone so nice and so clever as your sister Vera all to yourselves."

"Yes, indeed." Mr Raeburn rose to make room for his hostess in the circle round the fire. "I don't think we can allow it any

Vera bit her lip. There had been no one to represent this view of the matter to the children hitherto, and she was appalled to find how the seclusion of the past months had robbed her, as she fancied, of the *savoir-vivre* that enables one to wear an unmoved face above all the waves beneath.

Mr Raeburn stretched out his feet to the blazing fire with the air of one who feels himself at home. "I simply can't realize," he said, "that I have never been here before. I know that I shall want to prowl about presently, and look at all the interesting things."

Vera hesitated for a moment, and then raised her eyes. The room must suggest so many questions to the mind behind that face. "You shall do whatever you like," she said simply.

"Now?"

She nodded. "Now."

The house had been metamorphosed since the minister's visit by the importation of Mr Carruthers' library. Books clothed the two sitting-rooms on the ground floor, peeped from niches in the hall like ferns from an old wall, and blossomed out at random in the bedrooms upstairs. One does not often see such a library. Science, of course, predominated largely. Vera's father had laid a ruthless hand on the old divines that had come down to him, but there were some even of these whom he would not sacrifice; and what of Chaucer, and Shakespeare, and Burns, and even good John Galt? The artist is for us all.

Mr Raeburn scanned the books for a long time in silence, and then turned to Vera with a sigh and a smile. "How illiterate one is!"

"Dreadfully!" she agreed. But, in spite of herself, her voice had a note of expectancy that was wanting in his. Ten years make such a difference in a human outlook.

"I wonder how much of all this will live?"

"Oh, a great deal." She was representing her father now, and did not notice her own arrogance. Her finger ran along some rows of well-known names, and of others that were less familiar. "Many, of course, were splendid leaps in the dark made just too soon."

"Ah!" She seemed to have struck a line of thought that was his own. "It is a wonderful thing that leap,—that scientific insight and prevision. The scientific genius is so like the old Hebrew prophet. He singles out the essential from the mass of facts before him, and then—lifts up his eyes."

She looked dubious. "He mustn't lift them up too far."

Mr Raeburn smiled. Perhaps Vera's father had been one of those who never raise their eyes from the mass of facts before them. That would explain why the world had not heard his name. "There is not much use lifting them up at all unless he just can't help it,—unless the feeling that *something is there* becomes more than he can resist."

"My father always said one must not regret the leaps in the dark. They helped to fill the breach. The great thing is that we have got hold of the thread at last. All we have to do is to follow it up. The tragic thing is to think of the centuries when faithful workers were toiling away on a hopelessly wrong tack."

He smiled again. "Is the past so bad as that?"

"Or the future so good?" he asked defiantly.

"Or the future so good?" he agreed.

"Give me the future."

"With all my heart; but I am afraid you will find it is just what the past has made it."

A shadow passed over her face, and he wondered what he could have said that was amiss. At that moment Mrs Raeburn joined them at the window. The snow was still falling steadily. "What are you going to do with us at nightfall?" she asked.

Vera looked at her wistfully. "I am expecting that you will both develop wings, and fly away again."

"And failing that?"

"Failing that"—Vera broke into a light-hearted laugh—"the sheets *are airing* at the kitchen fire."

"How good it sounds,—and what lucky people we are! You are sure the fairy palace won't vanish away?"

Vera's face grew graver. "Not yet," she said, and she sighed.

She had flattered herself that she knew life, that her picture-gallery was full; but these people came to her from a different plane of existence from those with which she was familiar. They were of the few who bear on their faces—what many ("so be it," as Newman would say) feel in their hearts,—the wish to meet their fellows on a footing of helpful brotherhood. Little by little it came home to her in the course of the afternoon that she had misconceived the world if it contained people like this.

And so, by degrees, she let herself go, floating out like a seaweed in water, falling unconsciously into the pretty poses and gestures that were half French, half English,—all her own,—revealing a personality that was almost new to the children.

"You think I am right, don't you?" she said suddenly, checking herself in the expression of some dogmatic opinion.

Mr Raeburn looked at her with the curious sincerity that was characteristic of him, and shook his head, smiling. "On the contrary, I think you quite wrong."

She glanced up quickly, and then his smile was slowly reflected on her face. It told him plainly, if the information had been needed, that she was not one of the women who have been in the habit of hearing the plain truth from men.

They talked of cathedrals and books and pictures, —oh, no matter in what words. People have often said better things of St Gudule, and *Sociology*, and the Tintorettos in the Doge's Palace. The acquaintance progressed less by words than by silences and shades of expression, and rifts of laughter, and those flashes of agreement that find no need for words. But the children listened large-eyed, as was the way with children once.

Eric was the one to take advantage of a longer pause than usual. "I could show you a snow-crystal under the microscope," he observed tentatively.

The generous offer was accepted without delay, as daylight was going fast; and the microscope proved the herald of a series of hobbies,—a herbarium, a box of eggs, stamps, and a collection of butterflies. Mr Raeburn seemed really impressed with the butterflies, and Harold was justly proud.

"Where did you get that fellow? I haven't seen any about here?"

"Haven't you? Whew!" with true schoolboy superiority. "We've seen dozens." He paused and glanced at his eldest sister, but she did not meet his

eye. "Well, I suppose that's a lie," he admitted frankly. "In fact, it is an unscientific statement; but we have seen four, haven't we, Vera?"

Her smile was good to see. "I remember three; but you are much more likely to be right than I. And now our guests are very tired with their long cold drive. We must leave them to rest, and to say what chatterboxes we are."

Playfully she stretched out her arms as if to gather the children before her, and Mrs Raeburn caught one of the fine firm hands.

"Come back!" she said in a whisper.

Vera smiled without committing herself; but on the threshold she paused. Should she go back? And, if she was going back, why had she sent the children away? They were such a safeguard.

Alone with his wife in the firelight, Mr Raeburn was the first to break silence. "This takes one's breath away a little," he said.

"It *just shows*," she said with low emphasis, "how detestably spiteful people can be.

> "'Through the heather an' howe ga'ed the creepin' thing,
> But abune was the waft o' an angel's wing.'"

"You must not forget that she has in a measure laid herself open to it all. But clearly the seclusion phase is a recent one."

"It seems to me the most natural thing in the world. With her social gifts, she would be in constant demand. She elects to devote herself to the children, and she can't do things by halves. I call it splendid."

He did not reply. He wondered whether so simple an explanation would cover the pathos and suggestive-

ness of Vera's personality. With all her impulsiveness, she reminded him of a spirit enchained in a tree. "There is no saying what sort of crank the father may have been," he suggested, as if that afforded a more hopeful explanation. "What jolly little beggars the children are!"

"Aren't they? Did you notice how the elder boy pulled himself up——"

"Over what was only a picturesque statement? Yes."

"And Miss Carruthers always corrects herself when she exaggerates."

He laughed. "Not always, fortunately. That would be a Herculean task."

"How pretty she is too! Did you notice how her hair comes back and back upon her head as if it loved her? I never saw such caressing hair."

"Well, it is a cosy little world to drop into out of the cold. I wonder whether we shall be dropped out again as abruptly?"

"I know I won't. I have always felt that Vera Carruthers and I should be friends. One has just to wait and the thing comes about far better than we could have managed it. Do you remember the sermon at Oxford we liked so much about 'moving forward with the will of charity'?"

He nodded and laughed. "The charity is all on the other side this time, and the difficulty was that we couldn't move forward."

"That is always the way when you try to work out principles; but—the answer comes right."

A few minutes later Vera came in with the tea-tray.

Mr Raeburn rose to help her. "We were just saying how much credit the children do you."

"It's not I." She raised her eyes quickly as if the explanation were incumbent on her. "No, really it isn't. You see I have only had them a year. They 'growed,' like Topsy."

He did not contradict her, and a great comfortable silence fell on the three. The words that suggested themselves were too far ahead of the circumstances of their acquaintanceship; but no restrictions are placed upon silence, and there in the brooding fire-light their friendship grew.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A LEGEND OF PROVENCE.

"Do you know," said Judith, stopping suddenly in the midst of an unselfconscious war-dance, "I think we should do something just awfully jolly to-night."

"Agreed!" Mr Raeburn sprang to his feet with boyish alacrity. "What do you suggest?"

"Well, I have been thinking." The condition of her hair bore out the truth of the statement. "We might get Vera to play the fiddle. She won't do it often. And we know lots of poetry, and we often act." She paused with her head on one side. "Can you do anything?"

"Not much," he admitted, "but you see we are your guests to-day. The giving is all on your side."

"I see: well, I think we can manage." And off she went to summon a family conclave.

Of course the boys would not act,—boys do fail one so in the real crises of life!—and Vera did not play in the least as she had played that wild autumn afternoon when nobody was listening. Still the guests seemed to think it was very nice, and made her go on and on till the evening was growing late.

"I shall be glad to have your opinion of the girls' recitations," she said, as she put the violin back in its case. "I am afraid I am growing prejudiced. By the way," she laughed, "I am not responsible for their

choice of a subject. They have the run of all my books, and they do choose the most extraordinary things sometimes."

But, indeed, the performance required little apology. Judith threw the whole strength of her personality into what she was doing, and earned much applause. Less was expected of gentle little Aline; but Vera foresaw the surprise in store. The child stepped out of the limits of her own personality altogether. Under the very eyes of those present *two and two made five.* It was the old miracle. Like the conjurer, she placed a seed under a basket, and, lifting the basket, displayed a tree.

"I should be very proud of sisters like yours," said Mrs Raeburn. She was imprisoned between the two boys on the sofa.

Harold nodded with a man-of-the-world air.

> "'Our little sisters have their day,
> They have their day and cease to be.'"

"Oh, dear boy, *don't!*" she cried.

"I have been thinking all day," Mr Raeburn was saying, "how lucky your brothers and sisters are; and now I don't know which side is to be congratulated more. It makes one almost envious to think of the possibilities those four children open up."

"It is splendid, isn't it?" Vera's face was all aglow. "Oh, indeed, I always feel that, except when the foul fiend is in full possession."

"I shouldn't fancy that was very often."

She shrugged her shoulders. "You'd wonder, as Betsy would say. I try to make it as seldom as I can." The softening of her face was very winning. Few things are more pleasantly humbling than an unaccustomed atmosphere of appreciation.

Presently she caught Judith's hand. "Yours was a very short piece," she said. "Say something else before we break up."

And Judith, nothing loath, began.

Her second choice was certainly curious, and in no way liable to the charge of undue brevity,—Adelaide Proctor's *Legend of Provence.* What exactly the child saw in it, of course, none of her hearers could tell; but it seemed to appeal to her strongly in some way.

"'Have we not all, amid life's petty strife,
Some pure ideal of a noble life
That once seemed possible? Did we not hear
The flutter of its wings, and feel it near,
And just within our reach? It was. And yet
We lost it in this daily jar and fret,
And now live idle in a vague regret.
But still *our place is kept*, and it will wait,
Ready for us to fill it soon or late:
No star is ever lost we once have seen,
We always may be what we might have been.'"

Vera laughed when she had finished, and for the first time there was something discordant in her laugh. "Judith certainly did not find that in my library."

"No? It's very pretty."

"Yes." The monosyllable piqued curiosity. It expressed so much less than the preoccupied face.

"You are thinking perhaps that it isn't true."

Vera hesitated, and then recklessly let herself go. "I am thinking it is the worst of all lies,—a bit of rose-water philosophy."

"Don't you think it is one side of a truth?"

"Perhaps. If so, give me the other side,—

"'The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.'"

It seemed a long time before Mr Raeburn answered. His face was very grave. "That is the other side with a vengeance. Who said it? I don't profess to keep abreast with modern poetry."

"Edward Fitzgerald; but he got it from Omar Khayyam."

Mr Raeburn laughed. "Come, it is kind of you to let me down so gently. I knew I had committed myself as soon as the 'modern' escaped me."

She scarcely seemed to hear, and he fell into thought. When he began to speak, it was tentatively, with eyes fixed on vacancy, as though he had forgotten that any-one was listening.

"Whenever one meets with two opposing statements like that,—both true,—one can't help worrying at them till one gets the big truth that includes them both."

She tried to laugh lightheartedly. "It seems to me you take Judith's poem much too seriously. I don't see *any* truth in it."

"Perhaps that is because it says too little. Make it bolder and you will see its truth. Don't you think we always may be *something far finer* than we might have been? The worst we have done only increases the magnitude of the problem set before us."

Was the bow wholly drawn at a venture? Who shall say? The marksman did not turn to see its effect. And it was well. For a crimson tide swept over Vera's face, and her heart beat as though it would have choked her.

The snow had ceased in the course of the night, and Sunday's skies were clear. There was little doubt that the guests would be able to leave on Monday morning.

The conclusion of a first visit is always an interesting experience. The little episode—the little world—has been so much for the moment; but when the trunks are packed, and the carriage stands at the door, one begins to realize the perspective of things,—one tries to fit the part into its place in the whole.

And a good deal of fitting was required at the end of the Raeburns' visit. There had been a primeval simplicity about it of which everyone became more conscious now that the parting was near. One thing alone was certain,—the thing that had happened could never be undone. In little things as well as great

"The Moving Finger writes."

There were four points of view, of course. That of the children was simply expressed in undisguised lamentations; Vera's, in a growing dignity and aloofness of manner that were hard to understand. Mrs Raeburn felt that she had found a friend. Her husband—well, her husband was at once a Christian and a man of the world, and, as it chanced, he had married a generous, impulsive wife. It was the wife and the Christian against the man of the world. And at present the man of the world had so very little to say.

Vera tried to avoid being left alone with either of her guests, and the children made the task an easy one; but just at the end Mrs Råeburn outwitted her.

She began with the usual conventional expression of a desire to meet again, but it was obvious that no headway was to be gained in that fashion. So she tossed the convention aside.

"You know, dear, all this wouldn't have happened if it were going to stop here. It *can't* stop here."

Vera did not reply.

"You shan't meet anyone at my house unless you like. I would only ask you to meet my very nicest friends. I know most people are a waste of time; but I am sure you would like Mrs Wright and Lady Laurie."

"You see that my hands are full enough without social claims."

"Indeed they are; but, please, don't call us social claims. Come at any hour of the day or night. We feel as if we had known you and the children for years. My husband is so fond of children."

At that moment Mr Raeburn came in, equipped for the drive. He held out his hand with brusque cordiality.

"Well," he said, "are we to seal a bond of friendship?"

Vera looked up with frightened eyes.

"You have given us food and shelter; you have made us your friends. You can't possibly stop there."

Vera was ashy white. Never before had she looked so like a spirit enchained in a tree.

"That's true," she said helplessly at last. "*I can't!*"

CHAPTER XXIX.

TROUBLOUS TIMES.

"I SHAN'T see them when they call," said Vera the next day. "It's horrible, but it is the only way. Better put myself out of pain at once."

The call, however, did not take place exactly under the conditions she had anticipated, for the dog-cart drove up to the door with Aline and Eric comfortably installed in the back seat. They had been discovered sliding in the road, and had eagerly availed themselves of the invitation to scramble up. It seemed as if the ordinary conventions of life were always to be abrogated in the progress of this new friendship. At least Vera took the precaution of keeping the children in the room; and all Mrs Raeburn could say of the call was that it had kept the right of way open.

Meanwhile the threatening of a great calamity threw all other perplexities into the shade. Betsy duly returned to her work on the Monday after the storm; but it soon became clear that she was the same Betsy no longer. "I *am* glad to see you back," Vera said thankfully. "I simply can't get on without you."

Betsy's inward compunction made her manner more abrupt than ever. "Then I doobt ye'll hae to learn," she said. "I'm settin' up house for mysel' come Whitsuntide."

"*Betsy!* Are you going to be married?"

"Just that."

"To whom?"

"Oh, just yon mon that was in the railway carriage the day I saw ye first. He's aye been at me ever sin'."

Vera was horrified. "But he's not half good enough for you."

The answer was not immediately forthcoming. At last,—"He's weel aware o' that," said Betsy.

"It is a comfort to hear that, at least; but you are aware of it too, are you not?"

The bride elect made an unnecessary noise with her pots and pans. "Weel, ye see, he was that pushin'," she said at last.

"Well, Betsy, I hope you won't have cause to regret it."

"Oh, I'm aye tellin' him I doobt I've done a gey an' foolish thing."

"You tell him that! And what does he say?"

"He? What *would* he say?"

"Well, I know what *I* say. I shall never be able to fill your place."

"I doobt that's ower true. Ye'll get some feckless thing that mak's mair dirt wi' the ae han' than she redds up wi' the tither."

Vera could stand no more, so she left the kitchen. "The plot thickens," she said to herself. "The plot thickens more and more." But of course evening found her installed in the kitchen arm-chair, with her feet on a wooden "creepie," throwing half the energies of her being into the subject of Betsy's trousseau. It was not a question of Christian charity at all. She really did care very much about that trousseau.

She woke next morning with a new feeling of apprehension. She had been rather anxious at times about ways and means, and Betsy's thrifty habits had been an enormous help in keeping things straight. When Betsy was replaced by the "feckless thing," what hope would there be? In the old days, Vera had scarcely known what anxiety about money meant. With a handsome salary in addition to her own income, she had always spent freely, and she had taken up her burden of responsibility with a cheerful conviction that, if one gives one's whole mind to the question of economy, all things are possible. That little bubble had to be pricked, of course. One can do without new frocks, and wear patched boots. In a land of milk and eggs and fish and fresh vegetables, one can cut down the weekly bills to a truly surprising figure. But items like rent and school-fees are obdurate: they will bear no squeezing.

Whatever happened, the children must have a good education. That would have been their father's wish, and they were worth it. The girls she could teach herself, and Eric too for the present; but school and college must be managed in the long run somehow. Well, for the moment she could rub along. The cloud as yet was no bigger than a man's hand.

Another cloud developed more rapidly. April brought a letter from Miss Anderson, the children's aunt. She had been very ill with acute bronchitis, and she wished to remind Vera that the year of probation was more than over. She was as anxious as ever to see something of the children.

To such a letter only one answer was possible. Vera wrote, inviting her to come and spend a fortnight at the farm, as soon as the doctor thought the change

advisable. I am afraid she shed a few tears over the letter: she bitterly grudged giving up even an infinitesimal share in the children; but, after all, a fortnight could do little harm.

Somewhat to her chagrin, the children received the news with a war-dance of delight. The prospect of a visit was a change,—something fresh, and during the winter the farm had failed to produce a fair quota of castles in Spain. Aline was the first to make pause. "Are you really so awfully glad?" she said.

Judith nodded. "Of course I'd rather it was Mrs Raeburn; but visitors are great fun. We've such lots of things to show her."

"Yes."

"But I'll tell you what, Aline, you mustn't leave me alone with her *one minute*,—or she'll speak to me *about my soul!*"

"I know. But what if Vera wants me?"

Judith reflected. "Then I must just say that I have left my handkerchief upstairs."

"And come and tell us?"

"Oh, I wouldn't tell Vera. That wouldn't be fair, and I really will leave my handkerchief, you know."

Aline looked dubious. "That will mean going without it for a fortnight."

"I know." Judith nodded with the air of a philosopher who has deliberately chosen the lesser of two evils. "I only hope I shan't have a cold in the head!"

"And what about me?"

"I never thought of that. You were always too young, I suppose, or too good, or something."

"Too young, I expect. I wonder,"—Aline looked as if the impending promotion were a doubtful one,—"I

wonder whether Aunt Annie will think I've had time to develop a soul?"

And so the antagonists met, on the tiny field, each perfectly sure that hers was the banner of light in the everlasting battle. Vera was handicapped by the fact that she was the representative of law and order in the household, and she would not stoop to forego one jot or tittle of the easy discipline she habitually imposed. Another element in the case handicapped her still more. Much as they dreaded being spoken to about their souls, the children were dimly aware that their aunt possessed something which Vera had not. It was not church-going, nor Bible-reading, nor the saying of prayers, nor "talking good"; but it was there. Whether as a result of their heredity, or early training, or something beyond either of these, there was a harmonic in their being which Vera's fine fundamental note failed to call forth.

If, on the whole, the fortune of war was on Vera's side, it was mainly due to the genuine joyousness, to the expectancy and whole-heartedness, with which she threw herself into everything that was going on. The iron chain might gall the tender flesh, but she seldom doffed her garment of light; and there is no quality in their elders which children appreciate more than this. She treated her guest too with a courtesy which the other—weak and broken in health—was not always able to reciprocate. Miss Anderson had only known the flippant and audacious side of Vera's character, and she was much surprised to find the *ménage* so great a success. The root of the matter was assuredly wanting; yet, behold, Vera flourished like a green bay-tree. It was trying to flesh and blood to have to acknowledge it.

Curiously enough, it was after the visitor had gone that Vera felt her influence most. There had always been a barrier between herself and the children,—as indeed there is, more or less, between every child and its elders—but in some indefinable way the barrier had grown higher. There was little or no change in Harold and Aline; but Judith had frequent fits of silence and meditation; and, long after he had gone to bed one night, Eric was discovered in tears. He declared he had been asleep; but Vera saw the Bible thrust hastily under his pillow, and naturally she laid the lie to Miss Anderson's charge.

She was almost glad of the distraction afforded by Betsy's wedding. Judith and Aline were busy hemming under-garments, and everyone was getting ready some present which should be a great surprise. It was ridiculous to make so much fuss about a servant who had been with her little more than a year; but Vera was young, and outside interests were few, and she was determined that Betsy should have a good send-off. Her kindness made a great impression on Betsy's circle of friends; and, however lowly the circle in which such an impression is made, it always appears sooner or later in the summing-up.

CHAPTER XXX.

LADY LAURIE.

"Now, my dear,"—Lady Laurie was beginning to lose patience,—"I really will not be put off any longer. My nephew, Tom Allington, has simply raved about her since the day of the wreck. What is she like?"

"The wreck?" Mrs Raeburn looked puzzled.

"Yes. How do you contrive not to hear things? Some Norman sailors were driven ashore on the rocks east of the pier. Oh, they were rescued all right, but one had broken his leg badly, and nobody could make out a word they said. Some one had seen Miss Carruthers in the ship-chandler's, and everybody seemed aware that she gets a good many foreign letters. So they ran to fetch her. You can guess the rest. She was the woman of the moment, and you know how men lose their heads in such a case. The Provost quite monopolized her, and now the others want to know when their turn is to come."

"And what about the sailors?"

"Oh, my dear, you are like the woman who wrote to ask George Eliot what became of the pink silk handkerchief! What do the sailors matter? They say her French accent is a thing to keep one awake at night with envy. What is she *like?* Is she presentable?"

Mrs Raeburn laughed. "I wish I were as presentable," she said.

"You indeed! Is she *very* poor?"

The bright eyes sparkled with mischief. "That is not one of the questions one asks at a first interview. She is certainly not rich."

"Oh, bless my soul, who is rich now-a-days? Then is it true that she is an atheist?"

"She did not say so." Mrs Raeburn's face grew serious. "She did not give me the smallest reason to think so."

"But she doesn't go to church?"

"I have never seen her in church. It would involve a three mile walk each way. They have no carriage."

"And you like her?"

Mrs Raeburn held herself well in hand. "I like her," she said simply.

"Then what is the mystery?"

And poor Mrs Raeburn had to explain, as she had so often done before, that there was no mystery,—that it was all the most natural thing in the world, &c. &c.

"Is her accent really so good?"

"I don't know that I am a judge. I don't want to be guilty of 'unlearned praise.'"

"Dear me! But, if that is so, I would pay her anything she likes to come and talk to my girls. This new-fangled notion of teaching girls Latin and Euclid means a shocking neglect of their French."

"I thought the French was so good at Mrs Bright's."

"Oh, they are strong on what they are pleased to call the sequence of tenses, and that sort of thing; but what is the use of knowing when to trot out the pluperfect subjunctive if you can't pronounce it in such a

way as to make yourself understood? Do you think Miss Carruthers would care to have pupils?"

"I shouldn't think she had time. She gets through an amount of work as it is that puts me to the blush. She does everything for her brothers and sisters."

Lady Laurie looked reflective. "Well," she said irrelevantly at last, "Tom is very anxious to meet her, and, as you know, I would do a good deal to spite Mrs Bartlett."

. . . .

It happened a month or two later that Vera was waiting with Judith and Aline at a local junction. The children had little experience of railway travelling, and thought the pleasure cheaply bought—as in the present instance—by a visit to the dentist. They were in excellent spirits, bustling along as children will, when Aline unwittingly trod on the dress of an elderly lady. "Oh, I beg your pardon!" she cried, looking up with real regret, and the surprising thing was that, instead of hurrying away, she waited with pretty deprecation to make sure that her request was granted.

Now Aline was a very attractive child, a positive blonde with brilliant colouring, and she was perhaps more becomingly dressed than children were wont to be in those parts. In any case she took the lady's fancy, and Vera saw with doubtful satisfaction that the three had entered into an animated conversation. Her feeling deepened to dismay when, some ten minutes later, the lady joined their little party in a third-class carriage.

"Your sisters and I have made friends," she said with gracious dignity, "so you must allow me to introduce myself. I am Lady Laurie."

Vera bowed. "Miss Carruthers is my name."

"So the children told me. I have heard of you from my friend, Mrs Raeburn. You don't mind sitting with your back to the engine? Come, that is very nice. Then we can chat quite comfortably."

And Lady Laurie proceeded to poke the new specimen; but she did it so neatly, so tactfully, that the proceeding was quite a pleasant one, even for the specimen. Moreover, Vera defended herself well, and she did it very tactfully too, in a way that revealed little and piqued curiosity. The new specimen really promised to be worth while.

When the time of parting drew near, Lady Laurie took a sudden plunge.

"I have been away so much for the last year," she said, "that I have really called on nobody. Now I wonder if you would waive ceremony, and bring your sisters to a children's party I am giving next week? I will give myself the pleasure of calling on you later."

"Thank you very much," began Vera; but the lady bore her down.

"It is going to be a very pretty party," she said. "Each little girl is to come as a flower. Oh, nothing expensive. Most of them are just having fresh ribbons put on their muslin frocks. I think," she turned to the children,—"they would enjoy it."

In spite of her chagrin, Vera could have laughed aloud. The girls looked such a picture of hopeless, hungry longing.

"*Oh, Vera!*"

To judge by their faces, their lives might have been as barren of brightness as that of any child in the slums.

On the whole, it was better to laugh: the situation

really was too funny. Yet, beneath the laugh, Vera felt her ludicrous, pinprick share of the pang that is sharper than a serpent's tooth.

"You are very kind," she began again, ignoring the children altogether; "but the fact is I really have no leisure nor scope for entertaining and — for social life generally. I am sure the children will tell you that they have abundant pleasure in their lives without that."

But this did not seem to be the aspect of the case that was most strongly borne in upon the children at that moment. In truth they had known little pleasure of this particular kind. In their mother's time they had gone at rare intervals to sombre tea-parties, and even from these they had wrung the last drop of amusement that such entertainments are capable of yielding.

"Vera," said Judith solemnly, "if you will let us go this once, I will never *ask* to go anywhere again."

Vera began to realize that there was something to be said for the old-fashioned system of bringing children up to be seen and not heard. She was reaping what she had sown.

Aline neither moved nor spoke, but the tears welled up in her soft grey eyes. She had a rare gift for tears. They neither reddened her eyelids nor distorted her face. They simply welled up, and, if need were, welled over.

"I think you will see," Vera persisted bravely, "that I am right. Distances in the country are so long, and I have no trap of any kind. Besides, I simply can't afford to entertain in return."

"I think you are very sensible indeed. But everyone will tell you that nobody expects to take a pre-

cedent from me. I am a terribly self-willed person. I always get my own way."

Vera's face showed that she was yielding. She did so want the children to be happy,—to love her. Judith's serious moods had been more frequent of late: that very morning she had received a long letter from her aunt of which she had not communicated a word. This party would certainly be the very thing to shake her out of the morbid groove altogether.

"I will simply tell people that I bore down on you and swept you off. I assure you they know me too well to be surprised. So we will consider it settled. Next Wednesday. I will send the carriage at four."

Even then Vera did not speak; but she knew it was too late to draw back. She felt she had made a mistake; but she little guessed how far-reaching the consequences would be.

As it happened, the children had no muslin frocks, but Vera had several trunks of finery that had never been unpacked since she left Brussels. She went up to her room that very afternoon, and began.

> "'The common problem, yours, mine, everyone's,
> Is—not to fancy what were fair in life,
> Provided it could be,—but finding first
> What may be, then find how to make it fair
> Up to our means,'"

she quoted with a little laugh. "It might be as well to lock the door before we begin to unearth—the ruins of Rome."

Oh, the memories shut up among those "diaphanous folds"!—memories of hope, of depression, of triumph, of heartache, of exquisite yielding! Sweet and bitter; bitter and sweet. "How old am I?" cried Vera,

clasping her head between her hands. "How old am I? Is it possible that one little life shuts all my experience in?"

What was she doing? Why had she opened these boxes? Ah, yes, to be sure,—the children. Let her anchor her mind on to them. They should have a good time, God bless them! How odd—how odd it must be to have life all before one like that! Make haste, make haste. Let the scissors hiss through the stuff. Make believe that the children's bright future rose out of her own stormy past!

"Now, chicks, I am going to make sketches of your frocks. Come and criticize."

The shriek of delight was a reward in itself.

"Oh, Vera, you are a darling!" said Aline.

"You don't mind *very* much?" So Judith, with a pang of self-reproach.

Vera looked at her gravely as she would have looked at a grown person. "We never go back on what is settled," she said. "The next thing to do is to move on."

Then pencil and colours got to work, and it would have been hard to say which of the three sisters was the most engrossed in the task before them.

When Harold came home, he looked at the fineries with unsympathetic eye. "The idea," he said, "of a woman like Vera wasting her time over rubbish like that!"

The girls looked at him reproachfully. "At least," said Aline with cutting emphasis, "this is more amusing than your shirts and socks."

"No doubt. Think I don't see it? What *gits* me is that you girls take it all as a matter of course."

"Much you know about it!" said Judith.

Aline walked up to him, her hands clasped behind her back.

"*When I am married,*" she said, "I mean Vera to come and live with me."

Harold raised a little shout of derision. "Nonsense! Not really! Break it gently to her, old girl. They say joy kills, you know."

Judith went in search of her elder sister. "Vera," she said with an effort, "I do love you just dreadfully."

Vera kissed the child, but a shadow passed over her brow. Even to Judith the concession in the matter of the party seemed very great.

To everybody's delight Betsy dropped in on the night of the final trying-on, and for once even she was startled into some expression of her feelings.

"Weel, I niver!" said she. "Who'd ha' thocht that the bairns was sae bonny!"

The frocks were quite simple; Vera was in no danger of going wrong in that fundamental respect; but she had thrown her whole artistic faculty into the work, and the colours were extraordinarily good. Aline was bluebell, and Judith bracken. They looked like a couple of pixies.

"We're not very bonny now," said Aline ruefully, when the shabby serges were resumed.

But the glory of the transformation still lingered on her rosy face.

"Ye'd wonder," said Betsy consolingly. "I've seen ye look a muckle sicht waur. Noo awa an' play yersels. It's the mistress I've comed to see."

She had never said "the mistress" before, and Vera was touched. "And very glad I am to see you, Betsy."

"Ye're lookin' gey worn an' tired."

"Am I?" The information was obviously disturbing. "Oh, it's nothing. I have been sitting up late over these frocks. If the thing is to be done at all, it may as well be done decently."

"An' what are ye goin' to pit on yersel'?"

Vera hesitated, and laughed shamefacedly. "Do you know I haven't thought about that," she said. "No matter. I have several things that will do. It is a children's party."

"You see an' try them on the nicht," Betsy pursued relentlessly. "Maybe they'll no fit. Ye luik thin. Ye're no the woman ye was when I set eyes on ye first."

Vera's brow clouded, then cleared. "It's you I want to hear about," she said. "I have thought of you so much. How are you getting on?"

"Oh, fine," said Betsy dejectedly.

"Has it all turned out as well as you hoped?"

"I canna complain. What like lassie is yon ye've got?"

"She might be worse. She is not you, Betsy."

"I see that."

Too far east is west. The greyness of it all amounted to positive humour, and Vera laughed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BLUEBELL AND BRACKEN.

EVERYTHING conspired to make Judith and Aline a great success at the party. Shy at first and overawed by the splendour of the entertainment, their pretty cosmopolitan accent saved them from the charge of *gaucherie*, and they gradually developed a naïve piquancy that was very refreshing.

"She sees you think it all very nice," had been Aline's recipe for the treatment of the Fairy Queen, and, consciously or unconsciously, this was the key-note of their behaviour to Lady Laurie. They danced well, too, and their frocks were greatly admired. Some of the children were much more elaborately dressed, but most people agreed that Judith and Aline were "pictures," and Vera received so many congratulations on the subject that she began to feel as if she had built the Forth Bridge, or written *Paradise Lost.*

As the evening wore on, both girls were asked to take part in an impromptu charade. Aline consented gladly, but Judith by that time had become absorbed in conversation with a very competent-looking lady, and she said she preferred to look on.

Vera knew it was better that only one of her sisters should act, and yet she felt an odd sense of annoyance with both Judith and the lady. What could they have

found to talk about so eagerly? Vera thought of the gloom that had so often rested on her sister's face of late, and contrasted it with the animation of the present moment. Why could she not look like that at home, where everybody loved her and tried to make the most of her?

"My dear, you are a jealous beast," she said to herself; but the reflection brought small consolation.

Little by little she became aware that what she objected to was not the fact of Judith's conversing at length with anyone, but rather the fact of her conversing with that particular lady. No one else in the room would have mattered so much. There was something in the placid and business-like face that frightened Vera. It was so confident, so self-assured. Was that all? No. The face seemed to come out of the past,—to carry with it the thought of a time that was buried. She would go over at once——

But at that moment the lady rose, and Judith followed her out of the room.

All this time Vera was engaged in conversation with two clever young men. Well, many a woman before has kept the ball going under circumstances more distracting. Perhaps Judith and her new friend had gone to help with the charade. No; the lights were turned down; the performance began, and they had not returned.

At the end of the first "act" Lady Laurie came up to congratulate Vera on Aline's performance.

"I can't think what has become of my other sister," Vera said lightly. "That lady seems very kind, but I don't want Judith to be a nuisance."

"What lady? Oh, Mrs Bright!" Lady Laurie laughed. "She is not at all likely to let herself be

bored—least of all by a schoolgirl. I know no one who is better able to protect herself,—unless it be myself. She is my daughters' schoolmistress,—a very advanced woman indeed."

"Mrs Bright,"—Vera breathed more freely. The name was wholly without associations. But the face, —where had she seen the face?

Even when nothing depends on them, these suggested resemblances,—these "unformed halves" of a memory are disturbing things; and, though Vera was mainly convinced that her feeling was only a fancy, the fancy was hard to bear.

The charade was over before Judith re-entered the room, looking flushed and eager. She sat down beside Vera, slipped a hand confidingly into hers, and began to talk brightly, affectionately. Vera felt more gratified than if half the men in the room had been paying her attention. Truly times had changed.

"What have you been talking about, old girl?"

"Virgil," said Judith enthusiastically. "You know, Vera, that lady is awfully nice. She took me to the library and made me construe a bit. She said very little, but"—the speaker's voice sank to a whisper—"I think she was impressed!"

"Nonsense! Do you know she is a schoolmistress?"

"I know." Judith's eyes shone. "She has a school where girls learn things that are worth while,—boys' things. Mustn't it be splendid?"

"You would soon tire of it, dear. You are very lucky in having a brother who encourages you to work with him. Few boys are so generous in that sort of way."

"I am very lucky in having you, Vera." And if

Judith felt she was making a generous concession, she touched Vera's heart none the less.

"You missed your sister's performance," said Mr Allington, Lady Laurie's nephew, stopping in front of the attractive young face.

"Yes. Was it good? Oh, but you should see her at home!"

Clearly Judith was in the mood in which the milk of human kindness flows free.

On the way home in Lady Laurie's carriage the girls must needs sit one on each side of their elder sister.

"Oh, Vera, wasn't it nice?"

"Aren't you glad *now* that we went?"

Vera had not the heart to damp their exhilaration; but she knew too well what that "niceness" meant,—fresh links, increasing complications, then another rupture. And a rupture now would involve the children as well as herself.

On the following day a hired carriage drove up to the door, and the maid-of-all-work announced "Mrs Bright." Vera had not been troubled with callers since Betsy left, and had given no instructions. In any case she would have wished to see Mrs Bright. If there was anything to know, she preferred to know it.

She was relieved to find that the visitor was very cordial indeed.

"I begged Lady Laurie to introduce me last night at the children's party," she said; "but you and she were both so much in demand that the opportunity never came."

"It is very kind of you to come and see me now." There was an enquiry in the words.

"On the contrary, I had better own at once that I am actuated to a great extent by selfish motives. I had a long talk with that clever sister of yours the other evening."

"Judith? She seemed deeply interested in the conversation she had with you."

"She tells me that for the last two years she has been educated entirely by you."

"I try to help them to educate themselves." Vera's smile atoned for the pedantry of the remark. "Her elder brother is very kind and helpful."

"Well, all I can say is that she does you the greatest credit. Perhaps you have been told that I have a Girls' School at Duncairn. It is worked on modern lines, and I hope in a few years the girls will make a creditable appearance in the various examinations. Of course I am much handicapped by the amount they have to unlearn when they come to me. Most of them have been abominably taught. It is only the young ones with whom I have a fair chance."

"That I can well believe."

"Only a teacher knows what an oasis in the desert a pupil is who has a real gift for scholarship. As I say, your sister does you great credit, Miss Carruthers; but with a view to examinations and openings in life, one teacher can never be quite the same as a staff of teachers. I want you to send Judith to me."

"You are most kind, but it is quite out of the question."

"Might I ask why it is out of the question?"

Vera laughed. "It is like the reasons for not firing

a salute: first of all there were no guns. I can't afford it."

"There would be nothing to afford. The gain would be mutual. A pupil like your sister raises the whole intellectual tone of a school. Her success would more than repay the labour spent on her education. Any teacher would be glad to have her. With modern advantages your sister need stop at nothing. She could take a London degree or gain an entrance scholarship to one of the Women's Colleges."

The light had been dying out of Vera's face. "You are very kind," she said slowly, "but it would not do."

Mrs Bright looked disappointed. "I hope you won't decide hastily," she said. "Put yourself in my place. The most selfish of us does not live entirely to himself, and the work nearest my heart is to help on the education of women. Much of the energy one expends in teaching is like the talent hid in a napkin; what one gave to your sister would be put out to usury. In educating her I should feel that I was doing something for future generations: and I owe so much to past generations myself,—oh, and to women living in Edinburgh at this moment. Don't look on it as something personal. Consider it as the germ of the bursary I would found if I could."

Vera could not speak. She felt cruelly, bitterly angry. Judith was her pupil, her sister, her discovery; and some one offered to do more for the child than she, with all her love, could compass. She had sown the seed and watered it, rising early and resting late, and now some one else would fain carry off the harvest. She needed no convincing that the advantage was not all on one side. The advantage was mutual; yet the

act had the look of pure generosity. Therein lay half the sting of it. "Oh," groaned Vera in her heart, "who would have thought that I could be so mean, —so small?"

"You must think me very inappreciative," she said aloud; "but, although it is quite true that there were no guns, there really were other reasons for not firing the salute. No doubt there is much to be said for sending girls to school; but there is something to be said for keeping them at home too, even if the educational advantages are inferior." She was ashamed of not being able to keep a personal note out of her voice. It was too ridiculous and *gauche*,—as if she had the least doubt about the inferiority of the advantages!

"Come and see my girls some day. It would be difficult to find a happier, healthier family."

"Oh, no doubt."

There was a minute's silence, and then Mrs Bright rose. "I quite understand that you are unwilling to part with so delightful a pupil," she said, "and I hope you will forgive me if I have hurt you in any way. I should not be taking her away from you at all. She could come by coach every day, with only a two mile walk."

"So I may still have the privilege of darning her stockings," Vera thought.

"In any case, I am sure you won't decide till you have thought it over. Of course I know you will do whatever you believe to be best for Judith herself."

Vera went with her visitor to the door, arranged the carriage-rug, remarked on the weather, and waited till the driver made a start. She had lost all thought of the association Mrs Bright's face carried with it.

What she had felt at that first meeting must have been merely the premonition of the injury this woman was to do her. She. had not the smallest intention of giving in, but her sense of self-satisfaction was gone.

"How people *do* take the gilt off one's gingerbread!" she sighed.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A MODERN ESAU.

"*Aline! Are you asleep?*"

"No. Are you?"

"Is it likely? Aline, I am so dreadfully, dreadfully miserable!"

"What about?" Aline sat up in bed with wide-open eyes. "Vera is very unhappy about you, Judith."

"Vera! Much she cares!"

"Oh, you think she doesn't notice when you won't eat, and go about looking wretched?"

"Aline! Can you keep a secret?"

"You know I can."

"Do you know what Mrs Bright called about the other day?"

"No."

"It was to ask me to go to her school—for nothing."

"*No!* How do you know?"

"Oh, I know well enough. And Vera refused."

"Did she tell you so?"

"No, she never said a word about it; nobody did; but I know."

"Why don't you speak to her?"

Judith raised herself on her elbow. "*Because I promised that if she would let us go to the party, I would*

never ask to go anywhere again. Think of taking the party in exchange for this! I am like Esau. I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage."

"The party was very nice," said Aline reflectively.

Judith tossed uneasily. "So, I suppose, was the pottage."

Aline tried to recover a small share of the blankets without seeming grossly self-absorbed and unsympathetic. "It doesn't sound much," she said.

"This was the one chance of my life," said Judith, "and it is gone."

"But, Judith, would you have liked to take so much from a stranger like that?"

"Why not?" said Judith indignantly. "I would have paid it all back twice over when I had a school of my own; and I would never, never, *never* have refused to help a poor girl who wanted a chance."

"Do you think Mrs Bright is any cleverer than Vera?"

"I don't know whether she fiddles and speaks French. She is a *scholar*."

"How funny!"

"It's not funny at all. She says that at present the education of girls is far too 'patchy and scrappy,' and it's quite true. It is what I've always said myself."

Aline did not reply. Tastes differ, and, for herself, she liked scraps and patches.

"You know," she ventured finally, "if you hadn't gone to the party, you never would have had this chance."

But Judith was too cross to be logical. "I haven't got it now," she said.

"Vera's awfully kind, but I wish she would let us see a few more people."

"One gets so sick of the farm, the farm, always the farm."

Judith thought of Lucy Snow wandering forth into the world and ringing the bell of the *Pensionat des Demoiselles*. But a *Pensionat des Demoiselles* would not give her the education she wanted, and it was not so simple a matter to ring the bell of a plain Girls' School. "I beg your pardon," she heard herself saying, "will you bear with me while I construe a bit of Virgil?" Then her sense of humour came to the rescue and she laughed aloud.

"I suppose you think it would be very wrong and ungrateful on my part to run away?" she said when she had finally dismissed the notion from her mind.

But Aline had passed for the moment out of the region of moral judgments. She was sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE RAEBURNS AT HOME.

DINNER was over, and the library fire burned bright. Mr Raeburn sat in his great arm-chair, deeply engrossed in a half-cut German brochure. Presently he laid it down, sipped his coffee, and smiled across at his wife.

"Well, Ruth, dear,—warm at last?"

She returned his smile whimsically. "Fairly warm. My off-shoulder says there is a draught."

He glanced at the heavy curtains, and crossed the room in search of a shawl. "It's a subjective draught," he said; "but we'll humour the off-shoulder by all means." Wrapping her in the soft, white folds, he stooped to steal a kiss for his pains. "By the way, I saw your friend Tom Allington to-day."

"*My* friend!" She smiled absently. "Worthy Tom!—and what had he to say?"

"You would agree with him for once. He could talk of nothing but Miss Carruthers."

"Miss Carruthers?" Mrs Raeburn was startled into full interest now. "What does he know of her?"

"Oh, it seems he met her at a children's party at Lady Laurie's. She and her sisters were the belles of the ball in his eyes."

"A man of taste is Mr Allington."

"'So, hey diddle-diddle,
They'll rank as an idyll,'

in fact."

"I wonder whether Lady Laurie had called. She hadn't even seen Miss Carruthers ten days ago."

"Odd."

Mrs Raeburn paused to think. "I don't know why we should call it odd," she said. "You know we thought the seclusion scheme was a mistake."

"Well, she can't go back to that now. She has broken the ice with a vengeance."

Ruth would not have been human if she had not felt a pang of disappointment; but she called the feeling small-mindedness, and strove to put it down with a firm hand. She had taken a cordial liking to Vera, and she felt that the liking was mutual; but, in spite of all her efforts, that snowbound Sunday at the farm remained the high-water mark of their intimacy.

There was a knock at the door.

"Miss Carruthers, ma'am," said the maid.

"Talk of angels!" In a moment both husband and wife had forgotten everything save the reception they had met at the farm. Nay, I doubt whether it needed even that to take them out into the hall with faces of welcome.

"In the drawing-room? Why, the fire is almost out. Come into the library, Miss Carruthers. So glad to see you!"

Vera must have walked quickly. She was a little breathless.

"You see I have taken full advantage of your permission to call at any time," she said with a wan little smile.

"That was kind."

"Let me take your cloak."

"You will find that a comfortable chair. And you will have a cup of coffee, won't you?"

"We should warn you that it will bear no comparison with yours."

Vera looked up. "I know *I* shall like it better," she said.

"And when you have drunk it, you will tell us how you got here this wild night," Mr Raeburn said kindly.

"Got here? Why, I walked."

"Three miles? In that cold wind?"

Vera laughed. "One must draw the line somewhere in the matter of the things one considers a hardship. That was none. Or, if it was, it shows how much I wanted to see you."

Mr Raeburn placed a stool under her feet. "I am sure we don't need to tell you that the feeling is mutual."

Vera drank her coffee slowly, and set down the cup. She was obviously nervous. "The fact is I want your advice; I want it partly because you are the only people here to whom I can go: mainly because you won't scruple to advise the thing I hate, if you think it is right."

Mr Raeburn smiled. "That sounds very alarming. The only thing I can say in favour of our advice is that we shan't in the least expect you to take it,—shall we, dear?"

"Not a bit. The chief value of advice is that it clears up one's reasons for doing the other thing."

"It is all so absurdly small," Vera went on; "but fortunately you know that my life is made up of small things. And I suppose I have lost my sense of propor-

tion now, one does sometimes." She raised her eyes with sudden, irresistible frankness. "If you knew how grateful one is to you for being just—*so*—*good*."

Mr Raeburn rose to put more coal on the fire. "Don't take too much on trust," he said; "but our friendship and interest you may be quite sure of."

Vera drew a long breath. "You know I am trying to do my best for my brothers and sisters," she said. "In fact you are the only people in the world who do know. When I undertook the work, I meant to give myself up to it body and soul. I thought I was absolutely unselfish in the matter——"

"I am sure you have come very near being so," said Mrs Raeburn.

"But I begin to see now that I want them to be happy in my way; and they want to be happy in theirs."

Mr Raeburn nodded gravely. "Tell us all about it," he said. "Don't be afraid of details."

So Vera told the story of the meeting with Lady Laurie in the railway carriage, and of the children's party. "I suppose I must be fundamentally weak," she said, "or I should not have yielded in the teeth of all my principles. But indeed I did not wish to go. Every wish in my heart was the other way."

"That was why you gave in," said Ruth,—"of course."

Vera looked up gratefully. "It was," she said.

"No doubt it was very wrong of Lady Laurie to urge you to go in the presence of the children. But she is quite right. We all do forgive her much more unpardonable things than that."

"And, after all, why should you regret it?" said Mr Raeburn.

"Oh, because that was only the beginning of my troubles." And Vera told the story of the mesmeric friendship between Judith and Mrs Bright. She stated the case as fairly as she could, and then stopped short. "Now what am I to do? There was not a doubt in my mind when I refused; but Judith is miserable. I want my own way, and am prepared to insist on it. But if I get it, and the children are not happy, I am checkmated after all."

Neither husband nor wife seemed anxious to rush into the breach. "If you lay aside the special features of the case," he said at last, "you will see that the difficulty is as widespread as the human race. It is the time-worn conflict between the young and the old."

"And I am the old?"

He smiled. "You are the old. It is the irony of fate that you should have been thrust into the position at your age."

"But honestly I have tried so hard to make their growth spontaneous,—to help them to develop themselves."

"'*Hinc illæ lachrymæ.*' We all have to suffer for our principles. It is the penalty we pay for the privilege of having them."

"And as regards the special case?"

"I am afraid we should have to ask a great many questions before we could offer an opinion. You need not answer if we are too outspoken. Is the future of your sisters provided for?"

"Practically not at all."

"We hold very strong views here," said Mrs Raeburn, "about the desirability of bringing up girls to do some one thing well enough to support them in

case of need. I suppose you meant them to be able to do that?"

Vera laughed shamefacedly. "I believe I had a general idea that all four would set the Thames on fire somehow, and that was all."

"Of course a definite bent in a boy or girl is a great leading."

Vera's face hardened. "And Judith has a perfectly definite bent for scholarship and for teaching."

"If you had plenty of money, what would you consider the best thing to do for her?"

"I *want* to keep her with me, but she knows more Latin than I do now."

"In fact, you want them to owe everything to you?"

Vera winced. "That's it, I suppose. Oh, I don't want to deny that I am abominably jealous."

Mr Raeburn nodded. "That is a feeling with which some of us have abundant sympathy. But as regards the owing, it is better to look the matter frankly in the face. You are bound to come to the end of your tether sooner or later."

"I seem to be coming to the end of it now. I honestly believe that Judith is trying to behave well, but she is putting on the thumbscrew."

"Then, if you had plenty of money, you would send her to school?"

"But I haven't plenty of money," said Vera fiercely, "and why should I be beholden to a stranger?"

"Oh, there I agree with you entirely. Mrs Bright is quite right in thinking Judith a good investment; but you are certainly entitled to your own point of view. Mrs Bright does not seem to have gone about the matter very tactfully."

"I bear her no grudge for that. Perhaps I have not represented her fairly."

"She might have waited at least till she knew you a little better."

Vera smiled grimly. "I don't know that I should have made it so very easy for her to get to know me."

"Well, that's true."

"She said some very fine things about the debt she owed to others; but the finer they were, the more I hated her. Whatever happens now,—however I decide,—she has upset my poor little apple-cart."

Husband and wife exchanged a glance of understanding. Mr Raeburn rose from his chair and paced up and down the room.

"Miss Carruthers," he said, "we have always been interested in education, my wife and I, and in our small way we have done what we could to lend a helping hand here and there. You know we have counted you a friend from the first day we met you. Why not give us the chance of helping with Judith's education? No: let me finish. The money would be spent in any case, and spent on education in any case. It rests with you to say how much satisfaction we are to get out of it."

Vera's heart stood still. "No, no, no," she said. "That would never do."

He stopped in front of her. "*Now, why not?*" he said resolutely. "Let us get to the bottom of this. You know we are your friends, and you have given us to understand that you trust us. Why do you refuse? Is it pride?"

"*Pride?* No."

"You think one may take friendship and sympathy and trust, and feel bound to stop at money?"

She did not answer.

"Is that it?"

"No. I have never felt that about money. I would take it gratefully, if——"

"If what?"

She rose to her feet. She meant to refuse, and she did not mean to say why; but she could not help thinking, almost with a pang of envy, what a chance it would be for Judith that people like this should hold a stake in her future.

"Goodbye," she said abruptly.

"Do you wish to go?"

"Yes."

He rang the bell, and ordered the pony and trap. "Kitty will be delighted to have the opportunity of telling you how grateful she was for your hospitality that snowy day."

"The moon is quite bright," said Vera meekly. "I need not say I meant to walk home."

"Then it will be good for you to do something you did not mean," he said with friendly *brutalité*, as she resumed her seat. "Suppose you make it a precedent?"

But she resolutely changed the subject.

When she finally rose to go, Mrs Raeburn took both her hands. "It isn't really going to be No, is it?" she said. "You wouldn't disappoint us?"

To her surprise Vera had wavered.

"I don't know," she said desperately. "Give me time to think."

Mr Raeburn turned abruptly and left the room.

"But that is the one thing I am not inclined to

trust you with. You might make a bad use of it. Say Yes while the mood is on you. It is such an easy little thing to say."

Vera glanced round like an animal at bay. "Oh," she said, "if you knew all it means, you would not press me."

Once more husband and wife were left to discuss her in a *solitude à deux*.

"Well," said Ruth, "will she refuse?"

"She will either refuse, or she will tell you the mystery. It is much better for her that she should tell you. Whether it is better for you is another matter."

"My dear boy, why will you harp on the idea of a mystery? Mysteries are so rare in real life."

"Agreed," he said, "agreed. Very rare. But we have stumbled on a real one this time."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"MEA CULPA, MEA CULPA, MEA MAXIMA CULPA!"

"DEAR MRS RAEBURN,

"Will you let me know when I may come and see you alone? I want to have a long talk with you.

"Yours truly,

"VERA CARRUTHERS."

Mrs Raeburn did not show the letter to her husband. She had none of the experience of the spiritual director; but a kind heart is an excellent guide. She wrote a matter-of-fact little note, simple and cordial, and she fixed the earliest possible hour for the interview.

It was well she did, for Vera scarcely ate or slept in the intervening time. It is impossible to describe the tempest of vacillation she went through. Even when her will was fixed to tell the truth, her mind continued to invent all sorts of plausible stories to account for the situation in which she had placed herself; and then with a jerk she would realize—what she had learned from bitter experience—that such stories were no real escape from the difficulty after all.

The great temptation to lie lay in her conviction that Mrs Raeburn could not judge fairly of the circumstances. Social convention had thrown a great

gulf athwart the world of women, and there was no real passing across from one side to the other. Mrs Raeburn's lot had been thrown on the sheltered side. Vera felt bitterly that her friend's present impression, based on a misconception, was truer and juster than her deliberate judgment would be when she knew all the facts. How could *she* ever *know?* It would be hard, too, to lose her friendship. It was one of the very good things of life; yet what was the use of it when it scorched?

Of one thing she felt almost sure,—Mrs Raeburn would never, by look or outward sign, intimate to the world that she had changed her estimate of the woman she had so consistently defended. She—Vera—would know, and that would be all. Mrs Raeburn would cease to be her friend in any real sense of the word; but she would not drop her altogether. She was bound over by her own goodness not to do that. "Things have come to a pretty pass when I, Vera Carruthers, can deliberately entertain the idea of accepting another woman's Christian charity. It just shows *how good* the woman must be."

Even when she stood on the doorstep of the Raeburns' house she had not the least idea what she was going to say. Who can predict the movements of a leaf in the midst of a whirlwind?

The first glance at her friend's face convinced Mrs Raeburn that her husband was right. There was a mystery. She felt wretchedly unequal to the situation, but the first move at least was clear sailing. She greeted Vera with the old cordial simplicity, and installed her by the cheery fireside.

"I have not thrust myself upon you, have I?" said Vera in an odd, strangled voice.

"Thrust yourself upon me?" Ruth looked puzzled.

"Oh, of course, at this moment I have; but on the whole—since I came to the farm—I have not thrust myself upon you."

Ruth laughed. "No," she said, "you have done nothing so neighbourly as that."

"I have not taken your friendship by storm?"

Ruth felt herself growing nervous; and, if she grew nervous, Vera would take fright and slip through her fingers. She laid her hands on the shapely shoulders, and kissed her friend on the cheek. "That is just what you have done,—Vera," she said.

"Don't," faltered Vera hoarsely. "You make it so hard for me to tell you the truth. Oh, you don't know how bravely I can lie! Let me say at once that I am not fit to touch the hem of your garment. Make the worst of that, and keep me to it. Never mind how I try to explain it away. Don't let me off. Don't let me lie!"

And she did not lie. If we poor mortals ever can earn the right to anything in this world, surely Vera had earned the privilege of speaking the truth that time. She drew a pathetic picture of her own childhood, but when she came to the actual tragedy, she went through with it bravely; and, if she said, "It was Adam," she only spoke the truth as she saw it then.

When she finished, Mrs Raeburn was sobbing in sympathy. "You poor, poor, little girl," she said, "how I wish I had known you then—in the time of your trouble!"

Vera could not speak. The sudden, unexpected sense of deliverance took her breath away. For years she had been bowed down by a mighty weight, and

now—for the moment at least—it was gone—gone! She might have to shoulder it again by-and-by. Let her draw a few deep breaths of exquisite liberty.

Presently Mrs Raeburn began to speak. Her sympathy and kindness never faltered; but she could not conceal the fact that she was appalled by the awfulness of the situation. The unspeakable thing, the nameless terror, the absolutely irrevocable that we all vaguely dread,—had never come so near her as now. No doubt God had forgiven; she herself could more than forgive; but no one else must ever, ever know. To Vera's mind, strung up as it was at the moment to absolute truthfulness, there was something subtly depressing in Mrs Raeburn's relief when she heard how safe the secret really was.

"And when all that was over," she said, "what did you do? I cannot tell you how interested I am in every event of your life."

Vera told the story very simply, though indeed it was one to draw tears from a stone,—the story of a brave struggle carried on against overwhelming odds, —a struggle defeated again and again because people *would* take too much interest, *would* grow too kind to her. "I felt I must work," she said, "whatever happened, and I stuck to it."

"What a comfort you did feel that! for, of course, you did not need to work."

"I did at first. There were unexpected expenses at the time of my father's death, and for a time I was in actual need of money; afterwards—I'll tell you how it was. As soon as the first pressing difficulties were over, I was actuated by two great feelings,—hatred and suspicion of the 'good' women; belief in, and sympathy for the 'bad.' I thought I would make it

the mission of my life to lend them a helping hand—I, forsooth! Do you know it was heartbreaking work? Some really were bad: many were actuated by simple grinding poverty: the hopeful ones, the ones I had wanted to get at, all seemed to want grit and backbone. I said to myself, 'That is my class.' Do you know it terrified me? I made up my mind I would *earn* grit and backbone."

Ruth tried to control the muscles of her mouth.

"Oh," said Vera desperately, "that is not quite true. It is so hard to be really honest even with you. I believe I had a hundred other motives. I wanted to prove to myself that I was none the worse,—and for that reason I was always trying to make the most of the powers I had. I went on studying and taking lessons; I liked to be dainty in the smallest detail of my person and dress and possessions. The life of a teacher brought me in contact with people superior to myself. With the exception of one good lady who said I dressed too well, my employers always spoilt me, often made a friend of me. A candid friend told me in those days that I never looked at a great lady without learning something from her. There was truth in it."

"You were never tempted to follow your mother's profession?"

Vera shook her head. "I was and I wasn't. I believe success would have lain within my reach, but what I cried for was the moon. My whim was to walk through life above reproach,—'without a stain on my reputation.'"

"And so you have."

"Perhaps I have," said Vera dejectedly; "but I have always known in my heart that if people only knew,—one stain is as bad as a hundred!"

"You dear, brave, heroic girl! In the sight of God at this moment what is my purity compared to yours!"

It was very imprudent, of course, very impulsive, probably false, and might have done much harm; but it just so happened that the effect of the generous words on Vera was to teach her for the first time in her life the meaning of humility. Hitherto she had always stood on the defensive, had loved to dwell on her own good points, to contrast herself with the women whose selfishness just sufficed to keep them safe. Now that view had been taken once for all by a mind far sweeter and purer than her own. It needed no more asserting. She was free to think of her sins.

"You must not be too merciful," she said with a pathetic little smile. "Remember your responsibility is great. You are the one person in the world who has the right and the knowledge to speak. Do you think it is wrong on my part to sail under false colours?"

"I don't admit that you are sailing under false colours. You are a brave and good woman as our poor little standards go. Let the world value you as such."

"I am not what I pass for."

"Which of us is? Would the best of us wish to confess our secret sins in the market-place?—our selfishness, our worldliness,—our meanness? I recognize no distinction. It is nobody's business but your own."

"I must not let you think that I accept the conventional view of it all. Every fibre of my being has rebelled against it. It is the secret, the mystery, that kills me. Sometimes I can't breathe for it. You know—I don't know whether there is a God. My father thought it impossible, or at least unknowable,

though he worshipped truth even in its smallest detail, —that was why he called his eldest child Vera,—and nothing ever answers back to my call. But I am quite, quite sure of one thing:—If there be a God, *He is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.*"

The quotation came out rather jerkily, with an odd unintentional force, and Ruth allowed it to echo on into the silence. It was one of those chips on the surface that show in what direction the current of thought is setting,—chips that are only chips save to those who have eyes to see. With the intuition of a genuinely religious woman, Ruth recognized that Vera's conviction on this point was worth far more than her own; in her sheltered life she had seldom been tempted to lie; and, although, of course there was much that she longed to say, she would neither change the issue, nor dilute the strength of the assertion with a drop of conventional assent. A quatrain, of which she could not even remember the author, was in her mind,—

"One fragment of His blessed word
Into thy spirit burned
Is better than the whole half heard,
And by thine interest turned."

In fact, when she did speak again, it was to bring the conversation back to everyday things.

"I am very glad you have told me all this," she said; "but I honestly think you should banish it now from your mind. You have thought about it all till you are morbid. I would simply put my mind past it, as we say here. You are doing splendid work, and the past is past. You have others to think of besides yourself."

Vera drew a long breath. "I believe I can put it

behind me now," she said. "If you knew what it is that a good woman knows and forgives."

"Forgives!" echoed Ruth with glowing face. "Can you forgive me my sheltered girlhood, my easy life, my husband's faithfulness?"

Vera rose to her feet. "Ah, that reminds me," she said,—"your husband. You must not be disappointed if he takes a very different view of all this from yours. A woman can be God's angel: a man is bound to be a man of the world."

"In the first place, I don't mean to tell him."

Vera stopped short in the act of putting on her hat. She looked at her friend fixedly for a moment. "Then it is Goodbye after all," she said.

There was no doubt about her sincerity.

"Vera, dear, don't be unreasonable. Why should I tell him? I don't expect to hear all the private sorrows of his friends. He would be quite content that I knew and was satisfied."

Vera laughed, a toneless little laugh. "Oh, dear friend, you are so much wiser and better than I," she said; "but, if I haven't more knowledge of the world than you, at least I have paid a higher price for it. When you tell him, add one thing,—it will be the answer to his first question, spoken or silent. Tell him I have not kept anything back: I have told you all." Her lip curled almost imperceptibly. "As a Christian man, he can't forbid you to speak to me, and that is the main thing."

Mrs Raeburn's face flushed. "Have it as you will," she said quietly.

CHAPTER XXXV.

QUARANTINE.

VERA reached home about dusk, worn to the point of exhaustion. She pleaded a headache—truthfully enough, drank a cup of tea with the children, and went upstairs to bed. "Don't fail me," she said almost audibly. "In this one thing I know you won't; but don't ever let me get to the bottom of your goodness." Then, tired as she was, she sat down to her table and wrote:—

"DEAR MRS RAEBURN,—

"Does it come easy to you to be good, or have you to struggle like the rest of us? If so, go on. It is worth while. Be good all through. Don't be anything less than quixotically good.

"Your grateful

"VERA CARRUTHERS."

She slept a long, deep, delicious sleep, and awoke—to a world which did not afford much scope for emotional brooding.

First came the recollection that her servant was to leave that afternoon, and that an interregnum of several days must precede the coming of the next. Well, that was no great hardship, even though she

had not the Raeburns to work for as in those dear snowy days long ago! Judith and Aline were growing increasingly helpful. Then there was a note from Lady Laurie which she had felt too tired to open the night before. Would she allow Aline to take part in some theatricals they were getting up? Everyone said her gift was quite extraordinary. The gist of the note, apparently, came in the postscript,—

"I shall be glad to hear that you are all well. Two of the children who were here the other evening are down with scarlet fever."

"Why don't you eat your porridge, Judith?" said Vera more sharply than was her wont.

Contrary to all precedent, Judith began to cry. "My throat's sore."

"She has got a rash on her chest," vouchsafed Aline, half enviously, as if a rash were an order of merit.

Vera's heart sank. "When did you first feel your throat?"

"Yesterday."

"And why didn't you tell me?"

"You were so tired; and you had a headache too."

This was true. Vera told herself rather bitterly that the mother of the house must never have a sorrow nor an ailment. Then she remembered Mrs Raeburn, and took courage. "Poor old Judy," she said affectionately. "We'll put her to bed, and give her a nice hot bottle for company."

Judith was amazingly changed. All her moods and tempers were gone, and she clung to Vera with a childlike simplicity that was very comforting. There is nothing like an illness for forcing us to realize what we owe to our nearest.

A message was sent for the doctor, and he came in

the afternoon, bringing with him an air of buoyant cheerfulness, as doctors do. He said it was scarlet fever, that Aline was sickening too; but he spoke as if the disease was an old friend of his own, who wasn't half bad when you knew him; he discovered Judith's gift for Latin, asked Aline why in the world she wasn't married yet, and altogether no one would have guessed that he had spent half the night before with a woman who could pay no fees.

The days had not yet come when a professional nurse is the first thing thought of under such circumstances, and the doctor assumed as a matter of course that Vera would do the nursing. Fortunately it promised to be light, as fever cases go; but the prospect of combining it with housework was alarming.

"Don't you think you had better stay on for at least a few days?" Vera said to the maid-servant. "Your new mistress won't want to take you from a house where there is illness;" but the idea that she might be put in quarantine alarmed the girl so much that she went straight home to her mother.

And then indeed began a trying experience. Kirsty, the farm girl, gave what time she could, but it was not much. Eric was perfectly happy, shut up with his books and his microscope in a room from which he was only allowed to emerge by the window; but the necessity of keeping him apart complicated matters greatly. His position reminded him of Monte Cristo. Vera, in her earnest desire to preserve isolation, could think of nothing more inspiring than the fox and the goose and the sack of corn.

The doctor's kindness touched her deeply. He never seemed in a hurry, though she knew his practice was a poor and heavy one.

"My wife looks forward to calling when you get this business over," he said rather sheepishly one day. "She told me to tell you that she has been intending to come for ever so long. There are so many claims on her time somehow."

Vera smiled. "I can understand that," she said. "You know I neither pay nor expect calls."

Of course she had taken him by surprise. He had heard that she was clever and good-looking, and had assumed that she would be "too many for him." Why, he wondered, had no one told him of those haunting eyes?—and her mingled pluck and docility went straight to his heart.

He talked of her wherever he went, and his verdict, together with the information that she was in trouble, had its due influence on public opinion. The fact that they had judged her harshly in the past was with many quite sufficient reason for over-rating her now. It seemed as if from every quarter the tide was slowly but surely setting in her favour. If she chose to avail herself of it, a pleasant popularity was in store.

But the only people she cared about were the Raeburns, and for days they made no sign. In her wakeful hours Vera's mind was racked with every form of misgiving. Why should Mrs Raeburn write? There was nothing to be said, and yet—if she only knew what her friend was suffering!

In the meantime the combined housework and nursing were proving too much for her strength. The expected servant sent word that she could not come to a house where there was something "catching." On the fourth night Vera did not sleep at all. Every time she got up to mend the fire in the sick room, she wondered where she should find strength to begin again in the

morning. She had lighted a match for the fiftieth time when the door opened and some one came in with a cup of tea.

"*Betsy!*" she said with a queer little sob in her voice.

"Ay, it's me. I've comed to see ye through."

"And what about your husband?"

"Hoot, he maun e'en shift for himsel'. Nae doobt his sister'll dae for him."

Vera slept for an hour, and then went downstairs to assure herself that Betsy was really there. Already the kitchen had assumed a different look.

"This is like old times," she remarked wistfully.

"Ay," said Betsy. "If it was a' to dae ower again, I'm thinkin' it'd no be a mon that'd tak' me from ye."

Everything went well now Betsy was back, and late in the afternoon Vera went out for a brisk turn in the garden. It was looking bleak and wintry, but a few monthly roses bloomed bravely on. Presently she was startled by the sound of wheels on the drive. Had the doctor come back? Did he think more seriously of the patients than he had led her to suppose? It proved to be a brougham, but not the doctor's brougham. She had never seen the Raeburns in a close carriage before. Yes, they were both there, and she was caught. There was no escape. The blood slowly ebbed away from her face and lips.

"You must not come in," she said hastily. "The children have scarlet fever."

"We only heard of it a couple of hours ago," Mrs Raeburn answered regretfully. "We have come to take away as many of them as you can spare."

Vera laughed brokenly. "I can't spare any. Both the girls are ill, and Eric is isolated."

Ruth smiled. "Then we'll take Eric. Never mind the microscope. My husband has one."

Mr Raeburn had not spoken. Vera thought she would have given worlds if—herself unseen—she might have read the expression of his face; but she did not lift her eyes. "You are very kind," she said; "but it would not be right. Eric has been too much exposed. I am sure the doctor would not approve."

"We are not afraid of infection."

"No, but I am."

"Then let me come and help you to nurse them."

Vera laughed again softly. "I have got my whole staff of servants back for the moment. I have nothing but nursing to do, and not all of that."

"Then what can I do?"

"*Exist*," said Vera with sudden seriousness. Then she longed to have the pregnant word back. "I will let you know if I am in need of anything," she said more lightly.

"I don't in the least believe you will, do you, Frank?"

"I don't feel sure," he said in a reflective, matter-of-fact way. "We rather want some token of goodwill. Suppose you bring the dog-cart to-morrow afternoon, dear, and take this recalcitrant friend of ours for a drive?"

Vera tried to speak, then tried to keep back the tears, then—without a word of farewell—she turned on her heel and fled.

Of course no one else came to see her then; but she was not neglected. The Provost sent a keg of oysters, Mr Allington a brace of pheasants; from Lady Laurie's houses came a basket of lovely fruit. Mrs Wright was

kindest of all. With skirts well "hooped" out of the way of microbes, she called at the door to enquire.

Little by little, as it were in the air, Vera began to feel the goodwill of the people about her. Was it peace at last?—or was the wound healed once more "only slightly?"

PART IV.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ST VINCENT ONCE MORE.

THE night was very dark when the shaky old landau rattled up to the hotel at St Vincent. All the way from the station Vera had been trying to make out familiar landmarks, but in the dim light of the carriage lamps the sides of the road might have been a flowing river, and beyond was blackness unrelieved. The bell clanged discordantly through the empty house, and it was a relief when the dogs set up a chorus of doubtful welcome. The opening of the carriage door admitted a wailing gust from the pine-trees. Ah, yes; to be sure: she had forgotten: there always was a wind among those pines. Their outline was invisible on so dark a night, but their blackness was a thing that could be felt; and, oh, the sorrow on the sea! Vera shivered, and the driver shook the glass door impatiently. It was locked.

At length a gleam of light appeared within the verandah, slowly advancing, till it began to reveal the face of the woman who carried it.

"*Bon soir, Mademoiselle.*"

"*Bon soir, Madame.*" Vera's eyes flashed the eager question with which one arrives at the house of impending death, but there was no response. Nothing had "happened" yet.

Yes, it was still the same place in which she had known such sunny and such tragic hours; but everything was more dilapidated than of old; and Vera remembered after she had gone into the house that the broken panes of the verandah were patched here and there with bamboo matting. The dining-room had always been a sombre place; to-day a single lamp made an island of light in a sea of gloom.

"How is Madame?" asked Vera.

The woman shrugged her shoulders as though at this stage it were idle to enquire. "*Comme ça,*" she said resignedly. "The *curé* is with her now. Mademoiselle had better have some supper while she can."

Vera was tired after a long unbroken second-class journey, and she remembered gratefully the excellent *ordinaire* which the hotel casks had been wont to supply. But the wine had suffered like everything else; it was thin and sour; only a parched and thirsty throat would have found it drinkable. The simple supper was good, however; the pots and pans at St Vincent had long since learned to cook by themselves; and, by the time the *curé* came downstairs, Vera's sinking courage had revived.

The *curé* was a smug rubicund little man in a greasy black *soutane*. Vera felt a pang of envy as she observed the matter-of-fact air with which he emerged from the room she so dreaded to enter. To prepare a soul for death was part of the day's work for him,—and now came supper.

She thought with admiration, as she had often thought before, of the wonderful mechanism of Mother Church. She never leaves her children at a loss; there is no emergency for which she is not prepared. Whatever happens, the fitting machinery

is ready, and it will be no wavering on her part that will shake your faith.

The two guests—drifted so strangely together for a moment out of widely different worlds—exchanged a greeting, and Vera hoped Madame was not suffering much.

The priest shrugged his shoulders as the woman had done. No; as yet she had suffered little; she slept a great deal. It might be that she would sleep through the "*agonie.*"

Vera longed to ask whether the patient was facing the enemy bravely; to herself death seemed such an utterly terrible thing: and the letter she had received from Madame a week before had cut her to the heart. She would have put the question if this had not been the one person in the world who could answer it.

"A kind woman," the *curé* said, breaking expectantly the long French roll that lay by his "*couvert*"; "one who never willingly wronged another, kind and hospitable to a degree."

"She is the kindest woman I have ever known," Vera answered eagerly. For the moment it seemed as if this commonplace little man really was the mediator between a sinful soul and its Judge, and she hastened to bear her testimony while there was time.

At that moment the woman came in with the *curé's* supper. "If Mademoiselle will give herself the trouble of coming upstairs——?"

The hall was very dark, but Vera had not forgotten any of its pitfalls,—the unexpected steps, the sloping floors, the sudden turns. She made her way straight to the sick-room. It looked bare and squalid, with its broken plaster, soiled linen, and damp-stained walls.

The invalid lay propped up with pillows, breathing fast; but Vera was reassured by the air of tranquillity on her face. Indeed, she did not look so very ill.

"Ah, how good you are to come," she said gratefully. "Tell me, did they give you a supper you could eat?"

"They gave me an excellent supper." How often during the long journey Vera had wondered what her first words in the sick-room would be!

"All those hundreds of miles to a poor, old, dying woman! I thought I should die like a dog, with no one really to care."

Vera's eyes filled with tears. Such mingled motives had brought her,—kindness of heart, doubts about the past, fears for the future,—she felt ashamed. But perhaps with the easy charity of the sinner, the sick woman knew and forgave. "Do you realize," Vera said, "that I owe more to you than to any other human being?"

"*Chut, chut!* How little I did after all! Circumstances made it all so easy. And you have been happy? Turn your face to the light. *Mon dieu*, you have suffered too!"

Vera nodded. "Which of us escapes that?" she asked, fain to make the least of earthly joys to one who must let them slip.

"Have you ever met him again?"

"Never."

"And you don't know whether he is happy?"

"Oh, no doubt he is happy. He is prosperous,—famous almost."

"I thought you would marry happily after all."

"So did I," said Vera simply.

"Were you never tempted?"

"Often."

"Often," repeated the Frenchwoman regretfully. "Then your heart was never touched again?"

"I don't know. Once I think it was. He was such a fine fellow,—an officer."

"Young?"

"Yes."

"And really in earnest?"

"Altogether, at the moment, I should think."

"Oh, how could you say No?"

"He trusted me so absolutely."

"*Tant mieux.*"

"I could not have faced the cloud of suspicion when it came."

"But it never would have come." The sick woman tried to raise herself on her elbow. "The secret is dying with me."

("Thank God! Thank God!") Vera tried to keep the ring of relief out of her voice as she said, "But not the fact."

"*Ah, bah!* the fact! What is the virtue of most women? That lady who was here when you were—do you remember,—with the golden hair?"

"Yes," said Vera eagerly. "I never knew her name, but she must have suspected something."

"Oh, no doubt she suspected something at the time; but I convinced her that she had deceived herself. In any case, she is dead,—she died last year."

"And there was a man—a naval officer, I think."

"He saw nothing in it at all—save a boy and girl flirtation. *Mon dieu*, how much he was in love with you himself!" A gleam that was quite of this world flashed from the dying eyes, and Vera blushed to think that she had called it back.

"I have let you talk far too much," she said. "Rest now, and forgive my selfishness."

"Selfishness? *Pauvre petite!* We are not all on our deathbeds," and the invalid smiled with a courtesy a deathbed could not kill. "I shall sleep long enough very soon;" but the words had scarcely left her lips before she sank into a doze.

Vera laid a great olive knot noiselessly on the fire, and settled herself in the big arm-chair. Outside, the sea kept up a chorus of mournful sound. She felt as if she were standing on a patch of unclaimed ground between time and eternity, and an impenetrable mist hung over the river of death. She was glad she was not called upon to venture out into the cold and dark. It made her shiver even to sit and look on. Poor Madame, how idle to think that this frail little bark would reach a farther shore! And yet she was glad she had come. The sick woman was pleased, and—oh, the comfort of knowing that her own secret was safe! She thought again of the haunting, pathetic letter that had brought her. Well, she had done her duty, she had shown that she was not ungrateful for the past,—and she had her reward.

She too must have fallen asleep, for she was startled presently to see that the invalid's eyes were wide open. A rosary was in her hand, and she seemed to be murmuring her prayers.

When she had finished, Vera rose, and gave her something to drink. "Can I make you more comfortable?" she asked softly.

Madame shook her head. "The *curé* has given me great comfort," she said.

"I am so glad."

"What should we poor sinners do without religion?

Ah, Mademoiselle, dommage que vous ne soyez pas catholique!"

Vera sighed. Yes, it was a great pity. It seemed a terrible pity that the whole world was not catholic. But the Reformation was there, and it had to be faced. Not as a mistake, a one-sided statement, not even as a thing that was over and done with some two or three centuries ago. Had it not been going on everywhere, all the time, in the mind of every one of us? But oh, the pity of it, the pity of it!

She roused herself from her musing with a start. "Try to sleep again," she said gently.

"No, I have slept enough. I feel better. Let us talk."

"I have only one thing more to say. If there is anything I can do for you,—anyone you are interested in—you won't forget how much I owe you."

Madame did not answer for a few moments. "There is something you can do," she said. "I meant to ask the *curé*. When I am dead I want this ring to go to some one—a good girl who loves me. I wish I could do more for her. You will find her address in a letter under my pillow. No; put it in your pocket; you can read it by-and-by. She is alone in the world, *pauvre petite*, save for a paralyzed brother whom she supports. She will miss me—— Send her the ring——and tell her——and give her my love."

For two days the invalid lingered on, and then suddenly—without pain or struggle—the poor, good-natured, tawdry, sin-soiled soul slipped out into the dark.

Vera had not spared herself at all. She had thought it the least she could do to *feel with* her friend every

step of the way. No doubt on the mental side she had felt far more than the sufferer herself, for life was strong within her and the sunshine seemed so good.

When all was over she went down for a last hour on the beach. Nothing here was changed. The pine-trees clapped their hands and the great blue waves were laughing in the wind. What did they care for death?

Oh, dear Mother Nature, who never grows old, never wears threadbare, never dies! How young everything was, how fresh, how full of promise! Vera tried to tell herself that she mourned a faithful friend; but it would not do: the bondage had been too bitter. How often in these years she had said,—there is nothing so safe as love, save only death!

And here was death.

There is nothing so safe as death.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE YEARS THAT THE LOCUST HATH EATEN.

"At last," said Miss Johnston, holding herself well in hand. "I had ceased to expect it. Don't ask me how many years it is. Like the children, I have got past Addition and have begun Subtraction."

"You look like it," said Vera admiringly. She herself had just stepped, weary and travel-worn, from the *Paris-Lyon-Mediterranée* at the *Gare de Lyon.*

Miss Johnston was one of those women who have lost the bloom of youth before they begin to realize that they may as well make the most of themselves. To say that in the soldier's sense she was "smart" from head to foot is an inadequate description. Her very accent was smart. Her efficiency in dealing with porters, cabmen, loafers, was positively startling. She was certainly making the most of her king and her pawn.

"Been having a little holiday on the Riviera?" she asked while the man fetched Vera's luggage.

"Well,—that is one way of putting it."

"What is the other way?"

"I went to a sick friend."

"Oh. Better, I hope?"

"Dead."

"Bless me! No wonder you look tired."

Vera's brows contracted. It was still a bitter

experience to be told she looked tired. At the farm it did not matter; but in this gay world of Paris the charge was a serious one.

Miss Johnston gave her an anxious glance. "You want a change, I hope?"

"Oh, *don't I want a change!*"

"That's right. Step in. We won't talk till we get home. There is nothing like talking in cabs and omnibuses for making one's neck scraggy."

"Then in Heaven's name let us hold our peace." Vera leaned back and closed her eyes.

Miss Johnston had a delightful little suite of rooms overlooking the Champs Elysées. A neat French maid opened the door, ushered them into a sitting-room where the tea-tray was waiting, and then took possession of Vera's keys.

"You will be glad of a cup of tea while Pauline gets your bath ready."

Vera leaned back in her arm-chair with a little laugh of content. "Such luxury!"

"If *you* say so, I am honoured indeed."

"*I! Mon dieu!*"

"Such as it is, I have to work for it, I assure you, and I have very little service. I lunch and dine out!"

"How jolly!"

"And I mean to have a holiday while you are here. We'll frivol to any extent."

"Delicious!"

"I have just sent off a sheaf of galleys, and now I mean to stop and draw breath."

"Another novel?"

"Oh, no; the new one hasn't got the length of galleys. I write all sorts of things—often unsigned.

Just now I am doing a series of Bicycle papers for the *Saxon Weekly*."

"Bicycle Papers?"

"Not ball-bearings and cotter-pins. The two I have just sent off were *The Bicycle as a Chaperon* and *The Bicycle as a Means of Grace.* I am trusting to you for the next title."

"You should have asked me sooner. I can't go one better than the *Means of Grace*."

"Now you must go and lie down. We'll dine at seven, if it suits you, at the Café Bagatelle."

"If that means 'Dress accordin',' I simply can't. But I shall pass muster as your chaperon. I don't suppose they admit bicycles?"

She remembered how she had spoken to Mrs Trevithick long years before of "the dear old thing who serves the purpose of chaperon," and, with a fine sense of poetical justice, she laughed. "What fun Fortune must get out of that wheel of hers," she thought. "It is the very nicest toy I know."

"We won't go to the theatre to-night. Dressing-gowns and cigarettes are my suggestion. What say you?"

"Good!"

Very pleasant to Vera was the drive through the lighted streets, the brilliantly-lighted salle with its palms and fountains, the wonderful string band with its weird dance music. No doubt about the wine to-night. Miss Johnston had acquired a palate since the good old days.

From time to time a literary man or an artist strolled up with a pleasant camaraderie, and Miss Johnston kindled into something more fascinating than beauty, and showed her wonderful teeth, and conversation

flashed and sparkled as it had not flashed and sparkled for so many years!

It was late when they settled down at home to their cigarettes.

"Do you know," said Miss Johnston in her slow, emphatic way, "this strikes me as one of the rare cases in life when honesty may really be the best policy. When two remarkably able people have known each other intimately, have parted for an indefinite number of years, and then have met, so to speak, in their dressing-gowns, their mutual criticisms ought to be worth while."

Vera made a whimsical grimace.

"'The bud may have a bitter taste,'"

she suggested.

"True; but it is an old prescription of yours to take the bull by the horns. Let us begin by saying frankly, 'How old you look!' and then proceed."

"The remark would be most dishonest on my part. You look younger than you did at Ixelles."

Miss Johnston laughed, and knocked the ash off her cigarette with a well-groomed finger-tip. "Good old Ixelles!" she said. "*Qu'ils étaient donc heureux, ces jours de misère!*"

"Do you remember saying that our dressing-gowns were just typical of all the rest? I endorse the statement now."

"I don't think the quotation is accurate; but let that pass. Your dressing-gown is very nice."

"Quite, I think. One wants a different adjective for yours."

Miss Johnston had not broken out in laces and chiffons. She had too much sense of fitness for that.

She wore a soft white wrap, light and fluffy as new-fallen snow, with a friar's rope and hood.

"You seem to indicate that I shall come off best in the truth-telling business. You forget my novel."

"True," said Vera. "For the moment I did forget. 'Oh, that mine enemy would write a book!' I read it."

"Yes?"

"Oh,—I wish *I* could write such clever things."

"Humbug. Half of them were quoted from you."

"I did recognize one or two; but the setting was all your own."

"When you have quite done sharpening your knife——"

Vera drew down her brows. "The fact is, you have battened on sweetmeats and cream till you long for a *Hering-Salad*, or for Robert Macaire's *Saure Gurke*. Very good: you shall have it. I was immensely impressed at first; but, after the first hundred pages, I began to feel as if I were walking through a forest of Christmas trees. It was extraordinarily pretty and effective, but one did get enough of red candles and marzipan. One began to long for the reality and peacefulness of a real pine wood."

Miss Johnston nodded. "Yet half-a-dozen publishers are begging for 'another of the same.' They say what the public wants just now is epigram."

"And, failing that, they will take terse misstatements?"

"Whew! You went through the bone that time. Look alive with your artery forceps or the patient will bleed to death."

Vera held out her hand. "It is clearly a case of envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness," she

said. "Oh, it is quite true. There is that element in it. But you should hear the pride with which I say, 'Kenneth McNeil? Why, he is quite an old friend of mine!'"

Miss Johnston took the offered hand. "It is not a case of envy," she said, "for the very good reason that you have got something up your sleeve all the time. I don't know what it is,—a three-act play perhaps, or a striking bit of research for the British Association."

"Don't," said Vera. The words went through her like a knife. "I have nothing up my sleeve. It is a simple case of the years that the locust hath eaten."

"Honour bright?"

"Honour bright."

There was a minute's silence. Miss Johnston looked at her friend hard, and honestly tried to think of something consoling to say, but it was no use. The bloom, the roundness, the sprightliness,—all were gone; and what was left? Something, no doubt; but one could not give it a name, and what those men in the Café Bagatelle had admired was not the new something, but the ghost of the old witchery. If they could but have known what a mere ghost it was! If they could but have guessed at the former glory! In the olden days, Vera, with her pretty gowns, her freshness, her audacity, her moods, had come like a revelation into the dingy rooms at Ixelles; and her companion had been idealizing her ever since. The somewhat worn and pensive face was a shock: it set Miss Johnston thinking—fantastically enough—of the opening lines of *The Stones of Venice.*

When at last she spoke, it was harshly. "I am

not going to waste a shred of sympathy on you, you know. You were warned."

"Oh, yes, I was warned; and I don't ask for the sympathy. I don't regret it."

"Truly?"

Vera sighed. "I shouldn't regret it for one moment if I could really see that I had achieved much. But the children would have got on under any *régime*, and I broke their aunt's heart by taking them from her."

"I wish to Heaven she had broken yours! Why on earth didn't you let her have her way?"

"Well, she was poor and pious and sickly and low-spirited. They would have had no education to speak of."

"And can't she take them over now?"

"No," said Vera slowly; "she died last winter."

"Little brutes! And how have they turned out? Frauds, I suppose."

Vera stretched out her hands to the fire and her eyes kindled. "The children,—oh, they are perfectly splendid."

"They are, are they? Confound 'em. I have heard nothing about them since you told them it didn't matter what they said so long as they said it in good French."

"What was the joke?—There have been so many."

"They said if they didn't know the French for ham sandwich, was it the correct procedure to ask for *la crépuscule*."

"I remember. We had just been reading about the shades of twilight, and they were so proud of the word."

"But, bless me! that was a hundred years ago. Are they children still?"

"Oh, dear no. Harold is a medical student in Edinburgh. I hope he will pass his Final in a few months. And Judith is doing splendidly at Newnham, and Aline is going on the stage, and Eric——"

"Going on the stage? Has she 'that'?"

"In a measure. I was frightfully opposed to the step——"

"*Why?*"

"Oh, I suppose I am growing conventional in my old age; but the stars in their courses fought against me. We have wealthy neighbours who are devoted to private theatricals, and they simply took Aline by storm. She met Mr Carl Schmidt at their house, and he has asked her to join his Shakespeare Company. Herr Klesmer's advice to Gwendolen Harleth is quite out of date."

"I always thought he took a deal too much upon himself."

"Of course Aline will only have tiny parts at first. She was the page——"

But Miss Johnston had sprung to her feet.

"*Then you're free!*" She looked at Vera critically again. Now that her face had lighted up, she was very pretty still. She had temperament, charm. Life was not behind her after all. Given freedom from care, artistic interests, sympathy, admiration, luxury, she would be more attractive yet than she had ever been before.

"Free!" said Vera. "Oh, dear, no. The sinews of war were never so much needed as now. It is an expensive business starting a young doctor. And Aline earns nothing yet: and Eric's university course is still to begin. I must work harder than ever."

"Darning stockings?" The question slipped out icily.

"Yes; and earning money. I have a capital connection now; French, violin——"

"Stodgy little brutes! And do they take it all as a matter of course, may I ask?"

Vera laughed. "Of course I began by expecting far too much. I saw what I was giving: they saw what I was withholding. That is life; one can't complain. Providence must often have felt the same about the rest of us. But they are very good. When Harold went to Edinburgh, he wrote to Aline that he met lots of clever women; 'but they're not a patch upon Vera, you know.'"

She blushed as she spoke, as though she were repeating the flattery of a lover.

"Not a patch upon Vera," repeated Miss Johnston with slow emphasis. "I should think they were not a patch upon Vera. My dear girl, have you the least idea what the promise of your youth was? And now for all the best years of his life Pegasus has been toiling in harness. What's that you say? He did so many foot-pounds of honest work? Confound honest work! He might have been driving the chariot of the sun."

Vera winced. She was far from taking herself at Miss Johnston's valuation; but she was abundantly alive to the germ of truth at the heart of all this nonsense. The virtues she had been laboriously acquiring at the farm were of no more value here than were her English shillings and sixpences in the Paris shops. In any case, she was reaching the time of life when people begin to see that their lot is cast,—when they look back to the branchings of the road, and think—and wonder—— The awakening was bound to come; but Miss Johnston was opening her eyes with a lightning flash.

"Why didn't you write?"

"I couldn't."

"Of course not when you were worn out with feeding the pigs."

Vera laughed, but there were tears behind the laugh. *Courage, mon amie!* You are progressing. That was really funny. . . . My dear, you have a most mistaken idea of my life. You have no idea how kind people are to me."

"*Kind!*"

"And I have two friends—think of it, *two*—whom it is an education to know."

"That means they are making you narrow."

"It is they who sent Judith to Newnham."

"I am glad you were not responsible for that extravagance at least."

"And they did it so sweetly, so tactfully. Have you ever felt the charm of sheer——"

"Goodness," she was going to say; but in this pretty little Paris salon the word took on an antiquated and hypocritical air that frightened her, and she dropped it hastily.

Miss Johnston sank into a picturesque heap on the hearthrug. "Look here, dear old girl, it is not too late. Your work is done, and well done. You have started all those disgusting little vampires. Their one chance of not being hopelessly spoilt lies in being allowed to forage for themselves now. Eric can go into a bank or an insurance office——"

Vera smiled. "*Eric!* My mystical materialist! My Hegelian biologist!" It was part of the growing conventionality of her "old age" that she dreamed of sending Eric to Oxford.

"I want you to come and live with me. You

shall be petted yourself for a change. You used to say I was good at petting! We will read together, and go to the theatre, and hear music, and see pictures, and know just the people we want to know. You shall wear pretty frocks, and grow ten years younger, and have dreams and fancies that are worth a mine of gold. Do you know, Vera, those drawing-room plays of yours were extraordinarily good. We'll write a play together,—a play that will set the Seine on fire and make our fortune. You will get back your curves and dimples and have artistic Paris at your feet, and Guillemin shall paint you. And you will feel all the time that you have earned it,—that there is a rampart of duty done behind you."

"Don't," said Vera. "Don't make me discontented. There is a week before me of shops and theatres, and cafés and lighted streets, and—epigrams. A whole week. Why, it is an eternity!"

Miss Johnston drew rein in a moment. "We can manage all but the epigrams," she said drily. "Epigrams is hoff. But we've got some nice terse misstatements. Real natives. Most people prefers them as bein' heasier digested."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FORGING NEW LINKS.

"Duty," said Vera, "is like Ibsen's Brand, or the eternal hero of fiction. It must be all or nothing with him. Sisterly affection won't do. He must have your whole heart."

"Just wait till I get that down," said Miss Johnston, producing her note-book, "and then proceed."

"Or to look at the matter from the other point of view—if you once cease to make Duty your one object in life—how detestable it becomes!"

"Then all I can say is," said Miss Johnston severely, "so much the worse for Duty!"

"There is that point of view, I admit."

"And the exact practical upshot of all this is——?"

"The exact practical upshot of all this is that I had one microscopic duty to do in Paris, and, in all this whirl of enjoyment, I believe I shall leave without doing it."

"And the duty was——?"

"Oh, don't speak of it in the past tense yet. Why anticipate the day of judgment?"

"The duty is——?"

"To look up a young person."

"Oh, lor! I know. That is just the 'p'isonest,

freewill Baptist' kind of duty. 'I don't know a p'isoner.'"

Vera nodded. "The devil tells me I can write all I have got to say."

"Well, very likely the devil is right. Have a cigarette?"

"No, thank you. In this case I am prepared to say definitely that the devil is wrong."

"Then ask her to supper."

Vera meditated. "I don't see why you should do my duty for me," she said. "But, on the other hand, why should I deprive her of a supper?"

"Why, indeed? Except that she will in all probability be too nervous to eat it."

"Moreover, there is always something exciting about bringing two people together. It is like joining up an electric circuit. One may alter the whole course of two lives. You might take a fancy to her. Her fortune might be made."

"Look here," said Miss Johnston in alarm, "I think on the whole you had better *not* invite her to supper."

"I am glad you have taken the responsibility of saying so, for I think so too. An afternoon in the slums will be good for my soul."

"Always assuming that you have a soul."

"*Always assuming that I have a soul.*"

It was not to the slums, however, that her mission took her, but to a prosaic old tenement on the other side of the Seine. Even on the doorstep she felt an unaccountable reluctance to knock. If such an action had not been opposed to the fundamental principle of her life, she would have turned back even now.

And in the end she did not summon courage to knock. While she hesitated, the door opened, and a young woman in outdoor attire came out.

"Mademoiselle Chamotton?" said Vera. "I come from St Vincent."

"Ah, then you bring sunshine, Mademoiselle." The girl looked at her visitor with obvious approval, and her eyes smiled welcome. "Pray come in. We want it badly here."

"But you are just going out."

"No matter. I was only going to give a music lesson."

Vera wondered what her *clientèle* would think if she treated her duties in so airy a fashion.

The girl seemed to guess her thoughts. "It is the daughter of the *charcutier* in the next street," she explained, leading the way into a conventual-looking little bedroom. "She put me off last week. They only pay me fifteen sous a lesson."

"Fifteen sous!"

The girl nodded, took off her hat, and threw it on the bed. She was not pretty, but the details of her face and hands were singularly well finished, and she looked up at Vera with trustful eyes. "It is not that I am not worth more," she said simply. "I had a good convent education. But I can never leave my poor brother for more than an hour or two, so I must take any work I can get in the neighbourhood. Would Mademoiselle like to see my brother?"

"Let me tell you first what I have come about," and Vera gave Madame's message, and told the story of her death.

When she finished, the French girl was crying. "Ah, poor Madame," she said, "she was so kind!

Last year she invited Pierre and me to spend a fortnight with her. He was not so helpless then, and there was an excursion train. What a lovely place St Vincent is! I never knew there was such sunshine on earth. I have seen it in my dreams ever since."

"It is very lovely."

"And you have just come from there." The poor little teacher looked at Vera as if she had been a heavenly visitant. "How fortunate for poor Madame to have you! You did not go on purpose?"

"I was very glad to be there, sad though it all was. I did need a change too; and this selfish old body of mine"—she smiled—"is the better for the sunshine."

"I don't think it is selfish. It can't be selfish or it wouldn't have taken the trouble to hunt up poor little me."

The man who gives us credit for a virtue binds us over to attain it. "Shall we go and see your brother now?" said Vera.

Poor lad, he was an uncomely object, in spite of the loving care his sister had expended on him. Vera thought of the four happy wholesome creatures who were dependent on her, and a sudden loathing seized her for the mood of self-pity into which she had been thrown by Miss Johnston's unceasing flattery and commiseration. How ridiculous it seemed in the light of this girl's devotion!

"Don't you get dreadfully tired of it all?" she said, as they stood together on the doorstep.

"Oh, dear, no!" The ready tears had risen to the girl's eyes. "The doctors say he cannot stay very long, and then I shall be quite, quite alone. I never

get tired of working for him; but I do sometimes wish I had a real friend here. The neighbours are very kind, but they are nó company for me. I suppose *you* don't live in Paris?" And again she lifted those wistful childlike eyes. Their look went straight to Vera's heart.

"I live in Scotland," she said. "I am a Scotchwoman."

"But—Mademoiselle—no! And you speak French so beautifully?"

"My mother was French!"

"Ah, then you are a Frenchwoman after all. I was sure of it. Thank you so much for your visit. You don't know how often I shall think of it!"

It was too pathetic. Vera's heart smote her. Even she had never been taken on trust quite so royally before. "To-morrow is my last day in Paris," she said kindly. "Can't you come and lunch with me somewhere? We ought to be good comrades, you and I, for I am a teacher too."

"A teacher? Ah, Mademoiselle, some day when you have a tiny niche to fill, will you think of me?"

"I shall never have a school of my own; but French governesses are rather in demand in England at present. If you should ever really make up your mind to come, let me know. I might very possibly find something to suit you. And now let us arrange about to-morrow."

Five minutes later she ran down the stair. She had long since forgotten her old dictum that one never did a kind action without regretting it.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE GATEWAY OF ESCAPE.

THERE was a brilliant little company in the green-room next evening, and for once Vera really satisfied the demands Miss Johnston made upon her. She was gay, spirituelle, suggestive,—the ball was at her feet. Undoubtedly there was a future before her if she chose to avail herself of it.

"Did you see that tremendously bronzed, good-looking fellow in the box opposite you?" said some one.

"I did," said Vera calmly.

"It was a Colonel Dunbar. Just home from the front—covered with glory."

"Really? I thought he looked military. And was that his wife?"

The man of information nodded. "What did you think of her?"

"I thought her lovely."

"Needs a spice of the devil to warm her up a bit. Perhaps she'll acquire it yet. She is very young and an heiress. It's well to be a hero from the front!"

Vera was a little pale, but she had no difficulty in taking the conversation calmly. Long before the end of the play she had got over the shock of the recognition: perhaps it was the reaction from that which had been spurring all her faculties into activity.

It was long after midnight when the two friends reached home. A great silence had fallen on both.

"Vera dear," said Miss Johnston timidly at last.

"Yes?"

"Reconsider it. You are a brand plucked from the burning. Don't throw yourself into the fire again!"

Vera rose from the chair into which she had thrown herself. She was tired—so tired that she could have cried like a child. Every nerve seemed to tingle with an intolerable, clamant exhaustion. She took a candle from the table and stooped to kiss her friend.

"'Finish, good lady; the bright day is done,
And we are for the dark.'

Good-night, dear, good-night."

Once in her room, she extinguished the candle, threw open the window, and knelt down as she had often done before to look out on the lights of Paris. It was all very beautiful and brilliant,—and now she was going back to the farm.

Was Miss Johnston right? Did success lie before her here? Give imagination the rein, and let it run free! She would grow more interesting, more piquant, every day if she lived in this spinning world. She was safe now from the fear that had darkened her life, but, even if the unspeakable horror came upon her, what would it matter here? Would her editor care?—or the people who acted her play?—or these men who thronged about her in the green-room? Not a whit. A new light of appreciation would come into their eyes. "Ah, the witch, I might have known it!" They would admire her more than ever, and claim her as one of themselves.

Well, if she had it all,—all that and more,—would she be content?

No.

If it had been she who had sat by Colonel Dunbar, attired in that lovely gown, would she then have been content?

Oh, no.

If—back at St Vincent—Giles had come to claim her, bearing with him all the promise of the future and all the fervour of first love?

Not even then.

At that a great terror came upon her. Was she sinking into a mere death in life?

"Oh, God," she cried in terror, "take from me what Thou wilt; but leave me my *joy in life!*"

The lights of Paris died away from her eyes: the occasional hum and rattle fell on unhearing ears. For a long time she knelt in contemplation too deep for words. Well, one thing was left,—duty, righteousness—such righteousness as that in which the Raeburns seemed growing every day—a righteousness that left far out of sight all poor achievements of her own. The thought came like a breath from the Alps at sunrise, so pure, so fresh, so bracing, in the midst of a heated world; and to her own boundless surprise she found herself grasping it with "uttermost surrender of assent."

And then a strange thing happened. It was as though the "dome of many-coloured glass" gave way, and she found herself in the "white radiance of eternity." *Lo, God is here!* For the first time the spiritual world lay around her so clear, so luminous, that her intellect had nothing to ask, nothing to say. It was the old vision that has gladdened the heart of

seer and saint in all generations, that comes perhaps in glimpses to every man. Vera had waited long for it, and it came now with overwhelming force. Lo, God is here. Cease to resist. Step out of self. Take His way. Half an hour before she had been worn, jaded, depressed,—full of fear and foreboding. Now a great gladness, an infinite expectancy, coursed through her veins. She felt as though she had drunk of the elixir of life. It seemed to her that often before she had opened the sluice-gates of her being wider than she had done to-night; but who was she that she should command the reviving tide? Enough—far more than enough—that it came now. Would she not gladly have waited for it a hundred years?

Hours passed before she threw herself on the bed; but sleep was far from her eyes. The events, the circumstances of life, were still the same, and yet how changed. A great unity, a great simplicity had come over everything. She had got hold of the right end of the skein.

And the stain on her past? What of that? Did it assume a blackness undreamed of before? Not so. Not yet, at least. Shall the children of the bride-chamber fast while the bridegroom is with them? About her "sin" she felt just this. In this supreme moment of her life, she was giving up all claim to happiness, success, popularity, the things that the world holds good; she was choosing for her portion the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and, in thus giving up her future, she instinctively felt the right to give up her past. If the kingdom of God was the one thing for which she cared, Omnipotence for evermore was on her side. The past was not blotted out: never that. But, if she was ever called upon to

face it, she would face it with the hosts of the Lord at her back. Herein lay freedom; herein lay the way of escape.

Of course she thought she had attained, poor Vera! Well for her that she did think so. What martyrdom would be difficult in an hour like that? The conception was so beautiful, so dazzling, that it blotted out all meaner desires and fancies. She had yet to learn what it means to work the conception out in the unmanageable clay with which this world provides us.

CHAPTER XL.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

"WELL, *whatever her motives may have been*," said Mrs Bartlett severely, "I was glad to see her in church. I could see she felt it. It must have been a great set-down to her pride."

But the aggravating thing about people who are living keenly at first hand is that they are seldom aware of the inconsistency of their behaviour, and there was a pagan artlessness about Vera's religion that could not but be trying to the conventional Christian. She had gone to church in sheer gladness of heart, and not from a sense of duty at all. It is seldom for the real forced marches of life that we receive the credit and praise. The wounds that leave the blood-prints on the stones are oftenest unseen by every eye but our own.

She had never been slow about anything, and she did not tarry now. With all her faults she had never been half-hearted. If this life was to be lived at all, she would live it with all her might. What amazed her most was the discovery that she took her place in the kingdom of Heaven with every one else. It had not been so as a rule with the "righteous" of earth; but there was no drawing aside of garments in a world where everyone only wanted the lowest place. She

wished sometimes that she could begin the education of her brothers and sisters all over again; but she did not reproach herself for what she had left undone. She could no more have created this experience for herself than she could have breathed in water or floated in air: the marvellous thing was, not that it came late, but that it should have come at all. It was above and beyond all she had hoped and dreamed, and it had come with a rush of surprise, exceeding the surprise of first love. She could have found a very natural explanation of a similar experience in some one else; but, looking back on the hour when she had knelt at the window, jaded and spent, incapable of originating a thought of any kind, she could not doubt that her mind had been recipient merely.

She thought of the boundless effrontery of her words long ago to the children's aunt,—"I *know* you never will 'see'." But who could have guessed that Miss Anderson was referring to *this?*

She felt a naïve wonder—I had almost said "curiosity"—as to how the new principle would work out in daily life. Her first feeling was that it must make a profound change in everything,—that she would go back to the farm a different being—

And so she did: but I have no tale to tell of startling renunciations and unconventional deeds. She had no sooner begun to put the new principle in practice—or rather, to leave herself in its hands—than she realized the danger of letting the light merely flash off the surface of her being. It must take possession of the centre, and radiate to the surface in its own way.

And so the obvious change in her was attributed to many inadequate causes. She could not conceal the

radiant gladness, the confidence, the growing fearlessness, that had taken possession of her. Everyone said that the little outing had done her good; and they were quite right. So it had. Looking on at our fellow-men—nay, looking into our own hearts—can we ever tell when the liquid is on the eve of crystallization,—when it has reached the stage in which the addition of one atom more is enough to bring about the miraculous change?

. . . .

Some weeks after her return from Paris, Harold came down from Edinburgh for a few days.

"Why, Vera," he said. "You're looking bonny."

"Come in, you friendly giant." She led the way into the sitting-room where pine-logs burned in the grate and the tea-table stood ready.

He stretched himself in the big arm-chair with a grunt of satisfaction.

"How awfully jolly it is to have the old place to ourselves! I shall often come down this summer for a few days' quiet reading. I hope you will be able to keep it on till you come to keep house for me in Edinburgh."

"It is to be Edinburgh, is it?"

"Well, I'd rather starve in Edinburgh than grow fat anywhere else."

"But when you get the length of a house, there must be a dear little wife to keep it for you."

Harold shook his head. "I take no stock in women. I've no faith in them."

"Nonsense!"

"Present company always excepted."

"You have faith in Judith and Aline, I should think," said Vera hurriedly.

"Oh, of course; but they are such kids, they scarcely count."

"Kids, indeed! That shows how long it is since you have seen them. Do you know that Judith is engaged to be married?"

"*No!*"

"I only got her letter this morning. You may read the first sheet."

"Who is the fellow?"

"The son of Professor Jennings."

"I like his cheek. Has he anything to keep a wife on?"

"Not at present. They don't mean to be married 'for ages'; so Judith will be able to go to Mrs Bright as classical mistress for a year or two at least. She took a personal interest in Judith that money could never repay."

"I can't abide Mrs Bright."

"That is your mistake."

"Time was when you weren't so fond of her yourself."

"Very good. That was my mistake. You really must go over this new school of hers. It ought to be finished in a few months now. It is a work of positive genius. Yes, I like Mrs Bright very much."

"Oh, if you mean to go in for liking everybody——!"

Vera laughed. "Well, there is something to be said for that too. Seriously, one of the compensations for growing older is that one does get to like people better, and to realize more how good they are."

"*Good!*" said Harold wearily.

There was a minute's silence. "Did you ever reflect," Vera said, "on the scope there is in sheer goodness?"

"If you're so keen on scope," said Harold drily, "it's a pity it isn't you who are going in for this blessed Final, instead of me. How long has this business been brewing?"

"Read, boy, read! It is a very bonny letter."

So it was. When Harold had finished reading it, he sat absent-mindedly pressing his fingers along its folds for some minutes before he spoke.

"I say, Vera," he said at last; "it was an awfully heroic undertaking on your part, and I'm afraid we were beastly ungrateful."

"Indeed you were not. You least of all. You were always a comfort, Harold."

"You see we did not understand. We did not see that you were undertaking all the trials of motherhood—well, most of the trials of motherhood—without the *grande passion* at the beginning to carry you through."

Vera laughed softly. "You still believe in *grandes passions* then, though you have lost faith in the sex?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Judith seems to have found one. I never shall."

"Oh, yes, you will."

"We doctors see too much of the seamy side of life."

"Are you sure some of you don't carry the seamy side in with you?"

"No doubt. I don't profess to be better than my kind. But take Willoughby now."

A tongue of flame leapt up among the pine-logs, and Vera took a pamphlet from the table to shield her face. "Yes?"

"You've heard me speak of him. He is an awfully fine fellow. You know when Harrington died he came

in for a splendid practice,—is wired for all over the country in the sort of cases that mean a three-hundred guinea cheque. Well, he had been sent for to do a big operation up north, travelling home all night, and on his way from the station he made a three mile *détour* to see a dying woman from whom he didn't mean to take any fee at all."

There was a pause.

"Well?" said Vera.

"Well what?"

"I thought you were working up to a 'but'"—

"Was I? Oh, I remember. It was about women. Kind as he is, he thinks they are an awful fraud."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, you can tell by the things he lets drop to his patients in the wards; and, besides, his resident is rather a chum of mine."

"Is Dr Willoughby married?"

"Yes; if you call that being married. His wife is a regular 'buddy,'—always 'taking a leading part' in something or other; and I know for a fact that she orders tracts by the ten thousand. They are roughly classified in stacks,—the converted, the unconverted, the sick, the backslider, the *sceptic!*—for all the world like the stock mixtures in a one-horse dispensary. I don't believe she ever writes a letter without putting one in, and when she goes out in a hurry, she says, 'Just run upstairs, will you, Jane?—two unconverteds and one backslider.'"

"Are there any children?"

"No."

"Dr Willoughby is a religious man, isn't he?"

Harold made a grimace. "He fools himself all along the line; but I'm blest if I know whether he

does it consciously or unconsciously. In religious matters he just takes the line of least resistance, and you know what that is in Edinburgh. He rings hollow somehow."

Vera was silent. For the first time that event in the past had stepped out of the realm of convention, and had become a moral thing.

Harold did not speak again for some time. "I am grateful to you for many things, Vera," he said, "but most of all for having lifted us out of that disgusting world of goodiness and pietism. The very smell of it makes one sick."

Vera was leaning forward now, looking fixedly into the fire. "The Pilgrims' Chorus on a barrel-organ might make you sick." She drew her hand across her brow. "Do you know, Harold, my main quarrel with the goody people is not that they said these things, but that they did not say them *as if they were true.*"

"Oh, I don't deny that there may be something at the back of it; but all the evidence points the other way."

"Does it?"

"Well, don't you think so—honestly?"

"You know I will answer honestly if I answer at all. At your age—in our generation—I think the evidence does point the other way; and you would think I was taking a cheap and easy way out of the difficulty if I said it was not altogether a question of evidence;—but as one grows older and watches life,"—she paused in search of fitting words—"one begins to see *the things that are not bring to nought the things that are.*"

Harold did not answer. The question interested him very much; but he was not in a mood for the discussion

then. However the universe might be governed, his Final was the main point for him at the moment. Vera left it to him to make the next move. It was a startling digression.

"By the way," he said awkwardly, "I meant to ask you,—how are funds?"

"Flourishing."

"I am thankful to think I shall soon be off your hands; but the next few months will be the very devil for expense."

"Naturally."

"And there are one or two things that I can quite well do without,——"

"For instance?"

He changed his position uncomfortably. "Oh, well, there will be divers functions,—professorial dinners and the like—and you know I never had a dress-coat."

"Why, Harold?"

"Well, you know, some of the fellows simply haven't got dress-coats, and, if necessary, I am quite content to be one of them."

Vera felt a lump in her throat. "But I am not," she said. "What a brute I have been not to think of it. *Of course* you must have one. Stop a bit, Harold. I'll fetch my cash-book and show you just how we stand. There is plenty of money."

Brother and sister spent a very happy evening together, and, when they parted for the night, Harold stooped to kiss her affectionately. "I have faith in you, anyhow, Donna Vera," he said.

CHAPTER XLI.

A GREAT VENTURE.

THE new school really did bid fair to become the talk of the countryside. Hitherto Mrs Bright had worked quietly and unobtrusively, renting an additional dwelling-house from time to time as occasion arose; but, now that she had made up her mind to build, she was determined to realize her ideal once for all.

So the edifice rose and developed from day to day,—chapel, gymnasium, swimming-bath, laboratory, and much besides of which that conservative old county had never dreamed.

There were those who backed Mrs Bright against all odds, but for the most part opinions were pessimistic and depressing. If the school had been for boys, she might have hoped to see her money again, but what did girls want with all this? Arguments that had long since died a natural death in other parts of the country were brought into the field once more, and many were the opinions volunteered as to what was Woman's true function.

But as a rule the subject was discussed on a lower and more business-like ground. Directly or indirectly, the parents would have to pay for this, and, as everyone knew, the fees were quite high enough already. If, in the first instance, the money was coming out of the

pocket of the head-mistress, she must have feathered her nest in the past better than even the parents had imagined. If she was borrowing capital, she was running a quite unjustifiable risk.

Mrs Bright did not carve above her door the motto of the Marischal College at Aberdeen.[1] That principle was too thoroughly a part of herself to need any asserting. From the memorable day in her girlhood when she had declined her brother's help, and—in defiance of all family traditions—had simply *taken a situation*,—she had been well accustomed to succeed though the world croaked failure, and it was nothing to her that the world croaked failure now.

She could not perhaps have stood absolutely alone; but that was not necessary. The Raeburns, Lady Laurie, and Vera Carruthers were among her staunch supporters. Indeed, between her and Miss Carruthers there had arisen something very like a friendship. Soon after Vera's return from Paris, she had, at some personal inconvenience, come to the rescue during the illness of one of the school staff, and Mrs Bright had been quite touched by the whole-heartedness with which the *locum tenens* had thrown herself into a temporary bit of work.

And so things prospered merrily. Looking sanely and judicially on her own past record, Mrs Bright was unable to see a loophole through which failure might creep in.

She had sat up late one night over her accounts, and then had laid her head on the pillow with the delightful physical relaxation of one to whom sleep has been an unfailing friend. But for once sleep did not come. Instead, a phantasmagoria of figures

[1] "*Aiunt. Quid aiunt? Aiant.*"

danced through the recesses of her brain, and—wide awake though she was—the whole force of her will was insufficient to keep her mind fixed on that

> "——flock of sheep that leisurely pass by,
> One after one; the sound of rain and bees
> Murmuring: the fall of rivers, winds, and seas,
> Smooth fields, white sheets of water, and pure sky."

Most women of her age would have had a sedative draught within reach: the bottles in Mrs Bright's room contained nothing more subtly suggestive than glycerine, Condy's Fluid, and Eau de Cologne.

She went downstairs in the morning looking very much as usual, and of course it did not occur to her to say that she had not slept. Instead, she punished a pupil unnecessarily, snapped at one or two of the teachers, and failed to conciliate a parent who really was not particularly exacting—as parents go.

No matter. She would dine even more simply than usual, and a night's sleep would put things right.

But again the night's sleep did not come.

And so began an experience which was new to her, but which is familiar enough to most men and women in these latter days. The pity is that, in the nature of the case, the experience is so apt to come just when a false step may be fatal,—just when everything depends on our keeping well and sane!

. . . .

It was autumn, and the two women were sitting by the fire in the farmhouse parlour.

"Unless you can come to the rescue," said Mrs Bright gloomily, "I am undone. That is all."

Vera clasped her hands more tightly round her knee, but did not reply.

"I don't cry out before I am hurt." The firm lips quivered rather pathetically. "In all my plans hitherto I have simply never had to take my health into consideration, and now—— People tell such lies about sleeplessness that one does not care to enlarge; but I would give a five-pound note to be sure of three hours' solid sleep to-night. The doctors say I must have absolute rest, or they won't answer for the consequences."

"How did it begin?"

"There was no adequate cause of any kind. I suppose Judith has told you how abominably ill-tempered I have been lately. I simply can't face the worries of life. One day three of my servants gave me warning, and you know my French governess wrote to say she had hurt her spine in the Alps and could not return. At any other time I should have thought it was all in the day's work; but it worried and worried me till I was nearly frantic."

"Have you engaged another French governess?"

"No. There were two who wanted to come; but they have both fallen through. They are perfectly reckless about the amount of trouble they give."

"I might possibly be able to help you there. I do know of a French lady who is anxious to come to this country. She has been obliged to remain in Paris hitherto for the sake of an invalid brother, but she wrote me news of his death a few weeks ago. Her accent is very good, and she has pretty manners; but that is all I know. You would have to make the fullest enquiries. She might at least serve till you got some one else."

"Thank you very much; but—[illegible] are raising my expectations. You see I have st[illegible]n the very worst

time to break down. I have almost built a school which realizes my ideal of what a Girls' School should be. I have borrowed a great deal of money, and if our prestige falls off at this juncture——!"

"Now, take that reason alone," protested Vera. "You have been in a measure your own architect: your knowledge of carpentering, plumbing, plastering, and so forth, takes my breath away. I am no more capable of looking after the men as you have done—rousing their enthusiasm and keeping them up to the mark—than I am of drawing up a complete scheme of drainage."

Mrs Bright laughed. "Oh, the worst of that is over now," she said. "If you *pretend* to keep an eye on them, it will do. We shan't flit before Easter."

"Dear friend, you haven't the least idea how unsuitable a stop-gap I should prove."

"Eminently unsuitable in one respect,—that no one would want to see me back. When you flashed across my mind this morning, you brought with you the first ray of hope I have known for weeks. Everybody knows you, and that little air of repose is worth a fortune. . . . Your birds have left the nest; your brother is a qualified doctor, with an excellent post in the Royal Infirmary."

"And I owe you a big debt on Judith's account."

"No; you denied me that pleasure. Why did you deny it, by the way?"

"'Jealousy, ma'am, pure jealousy,'" paraphrased Vera, blushing. "Forgive me! But if I denied you the pleasure, I did not cancel the debt."

"Well, if you choose to take it so—by all means let us make the n[illegible]her the debt."

Vera hesitated[illegible] only since that memorable night in

Paris she had held herself in readiness to do the thing she was asked to do, unless it quite obviously lay beyond her powers. Now, in the ordinary acceptation of the words, this did not lie beyond her powers. It was a mighty task, no doubt, but something within her leapt out to meet the suggestion that she should undertake it. She loved teaching, she loved children, she loved "scope"; she felt that life had been too easy of late,—"Woe unto you when all men speak well of you!"—she saw that from Mrs Bright's point of view she *was* the very person for the work. And yet—there was the past. It was buried now, of course. "There is nothing so safe as death." But not even the gladness and growth of all these months had "cancelled half a line" of it.

She drew a long breath. "Suppose I refuse?"

"I really don't know whether it will be the churchyard direct or the churchyard *viâ* the asylum."

"You have no other string to your bow?"

"None."

"Then make all your plans, and I will come and receive your instructions, and, if no one else suggests herself at the eleventh hour, I will undertake it."

"You *are* good. But I mustn't lead you to think there is a loophole of escape. The Lord doesn't send His angel now-a-days."

Vera looked at her steadily. "We shall see," she said quietly. "Perhaps He may."

Mrs Bright leaned back with a long sigh of relief. "Heigho!" she said, "I believe I shall sleep to-night for sheer relief." Then the strong face hardened again. "I knew I should not be beaten." She laughed. "I believe I am prepared to sacrifice [illegible] anybody to that school."

Some ten minutes later she rose to go. "I see there is a letter waiting for the post. Shall I take it?"

"Thank you very much." Vera had forgotten in the interest of the conversation what the letter was.

The blue stamp on the envelope caught Mrs Bright's eye. If perchance the letter was to the French governess, Miss Carruthers might wish to add something before it was posted. As the thought passed through her mind, she glanced inadvertently at the address—

"*M. le Curé*
St Vincent——"

"St Vincent!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I beg your pardon; but you are the first person I ever met who knew St Vincent. I have sometimes wondered whether it is not a mere fairy region."

"Do you know it?" Vera's voice was singularly low and level.

"To my cost. A hateful place. My brother went there to recruit after his Final, and from that time everything seemed to go wrong with us all."

"Your brother is——?"

"Dr Willoughby of Edinburgh. Oh, you didn't know I had such distinguished relatives? He has prospered amazingly. We never dreamt of such success; but"—she paused and sighed,—"*he has not fulfilled the promise of his youth.*"

"Some one was telling me lately how kind he is."

"Kind? Oh, yes. There is no quality to which it is so difficult to apportion a moral value as to kindness. All through our childhood and youth we were such chums, he and I; but all in a night, as it were, a barrier spr[illegible]tween us, and I have never got into touc[illegible]ain. In fact I have not seen

him for years. As I say, I sometimes think a Provençal fairy sent back a changeling in his place."

Vera did not speak, and Mrs Bright laughed apologetically. "I wonder why I make you my Mother Confessor,—except that you have such a restful air of being out of the running, if you know what I mean. I have been thinking of my brother a great deal lately. He had a horrid spell of sleeplessness when he came home from St Vincent, and I had no idea then what it meant. The thought of it all gives me a great ache in my heart. Well, the past is past. Goodbye,—and God bless you!"

Like one in a dream, Vera returned to the sitting-room and sat down by the fire. No wonder the first sight of Mrs Bright's face had filled her with foreboding. What a fool she had been not to recognize the features long before! The resemblance now—in spite of marked differences—seemed to her absolutely unmistakable. Well, she could not draw back from her promise. Unless God sent His angel,—she was bound to go on.

"*He has never fulfilled the promise of his youth.*"

"*I sometimes think a Provençal fairy sent back a changeling in his place.*"

The words rang like a doleful chime in her ears. In a different way from that which she had always feared, it seemed to her that her sin was finding her out.

. . . .

"I had a long visit from Vera to-day," said Mrs Raeburn to her husband the next evening, as they chatted comfortably over the walnuts. "Such news! Mrs Bright is going away for a holiday, and Vera is taking over the charge of the sch[illegible]

Mr Raeburn laid down the c[illegible]

She looked up. "Isn't it splendid?"

"You must give me time to realize the situation."

"I only wish the arrangement was permanent. If I had half-a-dozen girls, they should all go to that school."

"Oh, that is of course. There is no mistaking *our* way."

She smiled resignedly. "Go on. State your 'but'."

"I was only thinking that the situation is becoming sufficiently electric. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. I hope we are not working up to the last act of a problem play."

"Dear Frank, with all its faults, life is seldom theatrical."

He sipped his port reflectively. "That is true, and the drama of life is mainly for those who have eyes to see."

"Like the Kingdom of God, it cometh not with observation?"

It was some time before he answered. "What if the coming of the Kingdom were the drama, and all our little sensations mere by-play?"

CHAPTER XLII.

AFTER LONG YEARS.

"No reply from your *protégée*," said Mrs Bright, "and here is an application from a Frenchwoman in Edinburgh."

Vera looked up from her newspaper. "Wire to her to come and see you this afternoon."

"She distinctly says she can't get away till next week. You will have to settle it without me."

"No; I want you to settle it; but I will go through to Edinburgh if you like and report."

"In this weather?" Mrs Bright looked out on the driving autumn rain.

"Oh, I like rain, as you know. Besides, Mr Carl Schmidt's Company is in Edinburgh just now, and I want to see Aline."

"Of course you have some good reason for wanting to do the kind thing. Let me see,—there is a train at 10.40. I will send for a cab at once."

The journey was dreary enough, but Vera was too happy to know it. Once more—after all these years—she was undertaking a big thing, and oh, the difference in her whole attitude of mind! Then she was an isolated atom in the midst of all sorts of warring powers; now she had no battle [illegible] own to fight, and all things were hers. [illegible]n of the

thought brought a glow of tears to her eyes. It seemed as though she—even she—could never know what fear meant again. "A thousand shall fall beside thee, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee." If this rushing train rushed on into destruction, what difference would it make? Was it not all a question of here with God or there with God? Youth and beauty and cleverness, all were slipping away; but something was left that would not slip away,—something of which she could say, as she had once said to Giles,—"It's alive: it grows!"

Aline had developed wonderfully, but she had not lost the look of dewy freshness which had promised to prove her great charm on the stage. "To think that I should have the chance of entertaining *you!*" she cried gleefully. "Oh, Vera, why didn't you give me warning? We have such lots to talk about. What do you think of that old humbug, Judith?"

"I didn't expect this so soon."

"So *soon!* She ought to do penance in a white sheet with a taper in her hand. Just think of all the things she used to say! If it had been *me* now"—with a swift, kittenlike movement Aline tucked her feet under her on the hearthrug—"no one would have been surprised; and"—she laughed gaily,—"I am just as heartwhole as I can possibly be."

"That's right."

"I am having such a good time here, Vera."

"You look like it."

"It is so nice having Harold at the Infirmary. *Hasn't* he gr[illegible] her[illegible]? You must be pleased, Vera, with the [illegible] all turned out!"

Vera leaned back in her chair and laughed.

"And he is so nice to the patients. He took me over his wards. I do believe he will make a big success."

"The first thing is to get him started. It wants money."

"Or influence."

"Or influence. But we haven't much of that."

Aline hesitated. "You have heard of Dr Willoughby, —the great don here?"

"I have." For years Vera's information about Giles had been limited to chance paragraphs in the newspapers, and now it seemed as if everyone were in a conspiracy to speak to her about him.

"Did you know he was a brother of Mrs Bright's?"

"So she told me the other day."

"I met him first at that dramatic reading I gave at Lady Laurie's while you were abroad, and I have met him several times since. Without vanity I think I may say he is impressed."

"Do you like him?"

"I do and I don't. I am not like Judith,—as she used to be. I don't mind if men notice my sex as well as my soul; but when Dr Willoughby looks at me, I feel as if I were nothing but a *young—woman*. Do you know what I mean?"

Vera did not answer.

"But if I can make use of him in Harold's interest, I don't see that that matters. At present he only knows me under my professional name——"

"*Oh, Aline, don't!*" The words seemed wrung from Vera's very heart.

"Don't what? You think I a[illegible] with fire?" She laughed. "I am very saf[illegible] st[illegible]

"I have no doubt you are safe." Vera walked over to the window and looked out on the dripping streets. "You can never have given the question five minutes' thought or you would see that the morality of it cannot possibly lie in keeping oneself safe. Society draws its own line; but if we are to draw it in the sight of God, it must surely be between the women who avail themselves of their charms to gain their ends—and those—well, those who believe that God made them too in His own image."

"You dear old prude! Why, Vera, don't look so fierce. I meant no harm."

"Dear heart, I know you didn't. But things look so different as one gets older. One begins to see the thing as a whole from the outside. I want you to drink the cup of life *brimming*, sweetheart. Don't be in such a hurry to sip and spill. And, as you love me, don't get into the way of talking like that even in play. Now I must go. I am taking pleasure first, duty afterwards."

"Will you have a cab?"

"No, thank you. I love the rain, and I have nothing to spoil."

"That's true." Aline looked at her elder sister with loving critical eyes. "I will be very good and obedient, and on your part——"

"Yes; on my part——?"

"Don't you *think* you could afford a new waterproof?"

Vera laughed. "Does this distress you?"

"A wee bit. I do so hate dowdy things."

"Well, we'll see what can be done. Don't tell him; but if Eric [illegible] Oxford, I must look at both sides of ev[illegible]."

Vera's errand led her to a classic-looking square, which seemed grim and depressing in the steady rain. The result of the interview was disappointing, and, as she descended the steps, she foresaw that Mademoiselle Chamotton would get the post after all. Well, one might do much worse. She was docile and amiable: it would be luxury to work with a subordinate who looked at one with those great admiring eyes. "I can make of her pretty much what I will," Vera reflected with satisfaction. "Whatever happens, she at least will be on my side."

Then her mind reflected back to Aline again. How fascinating the child was, how innocent, how merciless!

This was the thought in her mind when she raised her eyes, and saw on a brass-plate the name—

DR GILES WILLOUGHBY.

For half a minute she stood still,—realized with a pang of regret that she was looking tired and shabby, —then, without a moment's farther thought, mounted the steps and rang the bell.

"Dr Willoughby?" she said. Her voice sounded husky and indistinct.

There were two men-servants in the hall. The elder struck her at once as of a singularly unpleasant type. He looked her up and down somewhat critically. Like Aline, he seemed to disapprove of dowdy things. "I suppose you know this is his consulting-hour. Whoever sees him now pays two guineas."

"I asked for Dr Willoughby."

Her voice was clear enough now, if very quiet, and the man was cowed in a moment...

The weather had kept most ... so she

had not long to wait; but it seemed an eternity before the footman opened the door and ushered her into the luxurious consulting-room.

Dr Willoughby received her with the courteous chivalrous manner that his patients knew so well. The light, of course, was behind him, and, as she took her seat, it fell full on her face. She raised her veil bravely.

The silence seemed interminable. "*Vera?*" he said at last. His voice was scarcely above a whisper.

She nodded, unable to speak. She had meant to be so calm, but nature was too strong for her. For a few minutes each strove for a decent modicum of self-control,—each tried to gather dimly what the other had become.

When he came to himself, he was conscious of real pain at the change time had wrought in the petal-like face; but even in that first moment of disappointment he realized that time had given something in exchange for all it had taken away. Ay, *what* a face it was!

"Vera!" he said again with outstretched hand, and now his eyes flashed into recollection of the happy past.

She did not repel him, but he saw in a moment that he had made a mistake,—saw that they had met, as it were, beyond the river of death. And then came recollection of the shameful past. He was facing within closed doors the woman he had wronged and forsaken. If he had foreseen the situation, it would have seemed impossible that he could live through it; but now it was upon him, and it had to be faced.

He armed himself with something of his habitual, conventio[illegible] She was obviously very poor. "Can I [illegible] you?"

"Yes," she said simply.

Then there was another silence, during which she tried to master her feelings and bring her thoughts into form. When she spoke, her voice was steady; but the whiteness, the strain in her face bore witness to the effort she was putting forth.

"It is impossible that you and I should meet without thinking of the past, so perhaps it is better to say a few words about it quite frankly. I have often wanted to tell you that I don't blame you. I did once, but never since I was old enough to reflect about it all." A note of deeper pathos crept into her voice, and her face grew wistful like a child's. "Life is very difficult, and who shall apportion praise and blame? I tried you beyond endurance." Her lips curled with a suggestion of the old playful mockery. "'"The woman whom Thou gavest me!" Settle it between you, woman and God! What chance had I?' I see Adam's point of view *from my soul.*"

His eyes were fixed upon the case-book in front of him, and his face had set into the grimmest lines of which it was capable. Cutting reproaches would have been easier to bear than this unexpected philosophy. Well, there was no escape: he must hear her to the end.

She drew a long breath. "Well, I paid the penalty. I wrecked my own life, and I am dreeing my weird." She laughed—laughed with one of her sudden changes of manner, catching sight of the quaint thought ahead—but checked herself quickly as the laugh slipped beyond her control and ran into a sob. "It is wonderful what a habitable raft the pieces make, and the situation has its compensations. *One never a[illegible] a moment that one is on the deep.*" Her st[illegible] lovingly

over the last words. Then she turned towards him with one of the swift, graceful movements he remembered so well.

"But I did not come to talk about myself. I hear so much of you now that you are a great man. You are so successful, so brilliant, so kind,—so exemplary an elder. Everyone points to you as a pillar of the Church,—a tree planted by the rivers of water." Her voice sank to a whisper, and her eyes brimmed over with tears that did not fall. "I have been hearing all this for years, and—it may be only my own guilty conscience—but at last I felt I must come and say to you just this,—'*Be a good man*, Giles.' Don't let me have wrecked your life too. That is more than I can bear."

The frown on his brow deepened, and, with a swift movement, he raised his hand to his eyes.

"Forgive me!" she said desperately. "Do you remember how you stood in a great shaft of sunlight in the wood at St Vincent that day, and reminded me of death? I can see and hear you still.

"'I would hate that death bandaged my eyes and forebore,
And bade me creep past.'

That is what you were, and I—I ruined you. They say 'the woman pays,' but oh, the man pays too,—perhaps far more than the woman."

A great sob tore its way from his inmost heart, and his head dropped on his arms. How well she remembered that head! It was crisp and curly still, but a wanness had crept into the gold. How she had loved him! How she had hated him! How indifferent she had felt t[illegible]er. And now, to her own infinite surprise, sh[illegible] only [illegible] to be near him." Very softly

she laid her hand on his arm. "We won't say you didn't wrong me, Giles," she said. "We will try to say nothing that is not true in the sight of God. You did wrong me. Make it good! I don't pretend that even now I can look at it all as the world sees it; but when I think I have turned a soldier of God into a *successful man*—I just can't bear it!"

She was startled when he raised his head. Ten minutes even of agony had never graved those lines. His face must often wear that look in the watches of the night. He did not speak. What indeed could he say, unless, like Æneas, he threw the blame on Jove himself? The woman was having her turn.

In a few minutes she rose to go. "That is all, I think," she said, "except that, if circumstances should ever throw us together again, you need not be afraid of my losing my self-control, as I have done to-day. Goodbye."

"Vera, be merciful. Think of all I must want to ask."

She turned her quiet eyes full on his face,—surely the truest eyes that ever returned the searching look of man. "I will tell you whatever you want to know," she said; and she resumed her seat.

And then they spoke of the things that concerned themselves alone.

It seemed to Vera like a dream that she should be talking to him like this, without any reproach in her heart, only a great fellow-feeling; but the greatest surprise of all was still to come. In the old days she had often pictured the meeting: the picture had varied from time to time with her growing ideal; but of one thing, even in her crudest dreams, she had a[illegible] been sure, —that nothing would make her st[illegible]k for an

explanation. Yet now she heard herself saying quite simply as a matter of course,—"Tell me all about it, Giles. You must have suffered too."

And Giles, forgetting all that had happened since, feeling himself right down on the bed-rock of life, told her the old threadbare story of what he had come through.

It seemed long before Vera spoke; but at length, half laughing, she tapped herself on the chest, in her quaint childish fashion of old. "The conceit of the creature!" she cried, "to sit in judgment upon you. Ah, Giles, forgive me! How could I guess?"

Dusk was gathering when she finally took her leave; but she paused to remark on one or two of his pictures, anxious—characteristically anxious—that their parting should be in the C Major of this life.

On the threshold she turned with a sudden thought. "No one else will tell you," she said, "that your butler is not very courteous to poor women. You would not have it so, I am sure, if you knew."

Giles bowed over her hand with a strange new meaning in the familiar act. He was conscious of a sudden unaccountable longing to detain her. There were so many things he wanted to talk to her about. She had drunk deep of many springs. What was her experience of this and that? What did she think—of *life!*

But it takes a lifetime of companionship to answer that question.

And Vera on her part was glad to go,—and yet, if Fate had so willed, how glad she would have been to meet again on the morrow!

Dr Willoughby went with her to the door, and, returning [illegible] consulting-room, leaned against the

great marble chimneypiece, gazing into the glowing embers of the fire.

The shadows grew deeper and deeper, and the night was very dark before he switched on the light. Then he gazed round in bewilderment. The room with its costly fittings, its books and instruments, all had a strange, unfamiliar look, as though he had not seen them for a long, long time. He laid his hand on the bell. "I have decided to make a change, Dawson," he said. "You are at liberty to look out for another situation."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"No; I don't care to discuss the matter. Refer to me for a character by all means. You have been a valuable servant in many ways. This day month." With a little wave of his hand he dismissed the man, and, switching off the light again, dropped into the great arm-chair by the fire.

CHAPTER XLIII.

STRONG WHITE WINGS.

"I DON'T know how it strikes you," said the mathematical mistress, "but personally I feel as if the atmospheric pressure had been suddenly removed."

Judith laughed. "If I know my sister at all, you won't feel that long."

"She won't bustle us, anyhow," said Fräulein with a sigh of relief. "I do so hate being bustled."

"It is all a matter of taste," said a fourth teacher. "One always knew precisely where one was with Mrs Bright. I am afraid——" She stopped short and looked at Judith, who nodded philosophically.

"I shall be gone in a moment," she said, "and then you can state your fears more picturesquely."

"Oh, I am mainly afraid that we are going to live in an atmosphere of *Schwärmerei.* That little French mademoiselle is quite besotted already; and I must say there is a real lightheartedness about your sister that is very attractive. She was quite in her right when she spoke to us about bearing our burdens joyously."

Fräulein sighed. "She made me wonder whether she in the least realized what she had undertaken. '*Aller Anfang ist heiter. Die Schwelle ist der Platz der E* '"

The mathematical mistress looked at Judith keenly. "Is she going to fail us? Has she raised the standard higher than she is prepared to hold it? One knows that kind of person so well."

Judith clasped her hands round her knee, and looked up with the honest earnest expression that made her face very winning. "I *don't know*," she said seriously, as if the subject had been occupying her own thoughts. "It is years since I really lived with my sister, and I begin to think I was too young to appreciate her, or else she has changed. I think she always did wear a robe of sackcloth beneath 'gay raiment, sparkling gauds'; but of course she was never put to the test as she will be now."

"I thought not. Well, it would be a pity to see those strong white wings all limp and bedraggled. So few of the people one meets really have *strong—white—wings!*"

Judith gathered up her papers and went to her sister's room. "Can I help you, Vera?" she said.

Vera was standing on the hearthrug, looking pale and worn. "I don't know," she said. "Sit down. I should like to speak to you first about it in any case."

She seated herself in a big chair, and seemed to forget for a few minutes that Judith was present. Then she roused herself with an effort. "I have had a letter from Mrs Bright to say she has lost £20,—left it in her bedroom when she went away."

There was a moment's silence. "But the room has been thoroughly cleaned."

"Quite so. The maids brought me a threepenny-bit they found on the hearthrug."

"That won't go far, will it, towards supplying the

deficiency? Did Mrs Bright wait all this time in order to facilitate the enquiry?"

"She wrote as soon as she got her large box, and discovered that the notes were missing."

"Notes, were they?"

"Four new Bank of England notes in a thick registered envelope."

"H'm. Not the sort of thing you can mistake for a crumpled curl paper. Have you looked in the drawers?"

"Yes; Mrs Bright asked me to search the room myself, and I have done so. I have even examined the contents of the waste-paper basket,—as it chanced, they had not been destroyed. I have spoken to the upper servants. It is very wrong, of course; but the school was more or less demoralised at the moment of Mrs Bright's leaving, and several of the pupils and teachers seem to have been in and out of the room while it was being cleaned."

It seemed a long time before Judith spoke again. "Confound Mrs Bright!" she said at last.

"I don't see that that will help us much."

"Just as we had made such a good beginning; and now this hateful business will throw everything else into the shade."

"It seems to me that the more thoroughly we prepare for anything the less likely it is to come off in just the form we anticipated."

"It is awfully hard on you, Vera."

Vera looked up, smiling. The little word of genuine sympathy was just what she needed. "It is the thing that has come," she said simply. "I wish there was more of me to face it. Heigho! What is the use of all our virtues without the great grace of *readiness*?"

"I don't believe you will have to face it. You will get another letter to-morrow to say she has found the money."

"I am afraid not. Mrs Bright is very sure."

"She often was sure latterly when she was quite mistaken. Wait a few days in any case."

Vera shook her head. "I will wait till to-morrow to give myself the advantage of a night's sleep. In the meantime let us go and search the room together. Four eyes are better than two."

. . . .

From the moment the household was astir next morning something electric in the air seemed to warn both teachers and pupils that the placid life of the last week or two was about to be broken. When prayers were over, Vera asked everyone to remain, and then, with a very obvious effort, she spoke.

In the simplest words she could find she told the story of what had happened, and then there was a brief silence. "I need not tell you how deeply and earnestly I hope that Mrs Bright is mistaken; but you will see that I am bound to act as if there were no chance of this. I am bound to investigate the matter even more thoroughly than she would do if she were here, because in her absence I am responsible for the property she has left behind. Of course many ways occur to one in which the notes may have been mislaid: they may even now be found. We must give full weight to every possibility of this kind, but—the chance remains that one of us may have been tempted to take the money."

Her voice shook a little as she went on. "I would give all the little I possess that this should not have happened. I am such a coward that, if I could see

any excuse for burying it, slurring it over, making light of it, I would thankfully avail myself of that excuse; but you all see there is none. The thing has happened, and it has got to be faced."

She raised her eyes with a sudden look of appeal. "Make it easy for me! Don't force me to suspect and cross-examine and run the thing to earth. Even if the worst has happened, it lies in the power of one of you to lift this wretched sordid episode into a purer air, to ennoble even this *theft*, if it be a theft, by making it the occasion of a brave amends, the beginning of a true and honest life.

"We live together here in a very ordinary way for the most part. We eat and drink together, and our relation with one another is in the main a workaday relation. It is not easy for us—all together—to 'come apart' and think this over quietly. Yet that is what I want you to do. I want you to *come apart* and let us ask ourselves what are the things in life that really matter. It is nice to be thought well of by those we live with,—to be admired, respected, loved; we like all that as we like the sunshine. But is it the main thing, the thing that really matters? You know it is not. I am only speaking the thought in the minds of all of you when I say,—The thing which really matters is that we should have clean hands and a pure heart." Her voice seemed very low; but in the great silence it vibrated to the farthest corner of the room. "Is there anyone here who is content with anything lower than this? I do not believe it. Remember you are not making your choice for this moment only. So long as this sin is on the conscience of one of us, that one never will be able to . . . *ascend into the hill of the Lord.* Sooner or later she must confess, and, believe me, the

confession will never again be so easy as it is now. If there is anyone here who has taken this money,—she may deceive us all, she may see that we think her good and honest; but—what will it profit her? Will our respect be any comfort when she goes into the dark alone? She has put herself in the wrong for ever unless and until she retraces the false step."

The speaker passed her handkerchief over her forehead and went on with a wan little smile. "It is not easy to flesh and blood. I know that. But there is no other way. If anyone of you will confess that she took that money, she achieves an act of sheer courage that everyone here will respect and admire.

"Not that all will know. I do not think that is necessary. For the rest I must ask you to trust me. So much depends on circumstances that I cannot guess at. You may be very sure I will make things as easy as I can: and, if my friendship is any help, the woman or girl who speaks up bravely now may rely on that friendship for all that it is worth."

There was a long silence, and then she concluded in a matter-of-fact tone,—"There will be no lessons this afternoon. I will ask you each in turn to speak to me in my room. If the teachers will remain behind for a moment now, we will arrange how it can be most simply done."

Late that evening the teachers re-assembled limp and worn in their common sitting-room.

"I think," said the music mistress quietly, "your remark was that you felt as if the atmospheric pressure had been *removed*. No doubt you agree that the statement will stand a little revision. Three times now have I experienced a thief scare; but never before has

the enquiry been carried through at such a pitch of intensity."

"Amateurish," said Fräulein, "but impressive too in its way."

"You prefer the Scotland Yard method of treatment," said the mathematical mistress. "All I know is she made me wish I *had* taken the money,—for the very privilege of owning up."

Mademoiselle laughed rather hysterically. "It is ridiculous," she said. "No one has taken the money. A crushed envelope in an untidy room! The strange thing would be if one *had* been able to find it long after it was lost."

"Well, as everyone has disowned the soft impeachment, the enquiry will just have to drop, I suppose."

Judith was looking even more dogged than usual. "You little know Mrs Bright if you think she will allow that," she said significantly.

Mademoiselle looked up with startled eyes. "But is Mrs Bright so very severe?"

"She is just," said Judith,—"eminently just; but she doesn't much like leaving things at loose ends."

Mademoiselle cleared her throat. "But she is away on the Continent now?"

The mathematical mistress rose and looked out of the window. "I shouldn't be surprised to see her home any day now that this has happened," she said moodily. "In the meantime I propose that we go to bed."

Vera slept little after the strain of the day, and, when she rose next morning, her whole outlook on life was obscured by the fog of her physical exhaustion.

"Why did I undertake this thing?" she asked her-

self in uttermost dejection. "I was so quiet and happy before; and now there is a burden on my shoulders that I *can not* bear."

It seemed impossible to face the little frictions, the necessary fault-findings, the endless demands of the day. She had striven so hard to be patient and tactful and sympathetic hitherto; but now she had come to the end of her resources while the whole machine was dependent on her motive force.

"We shall come to grief to-day," she said as she went downstairs.

But even when youth is past, life is full of surprises. She had scarcely entered the breakfast-room before she realised that for the moment no sympathy, no tact, no resource on her part was needed. Every little wheel in the machine seemed, as it were, to be spinning of itself. Pupils and teachers alike looked up with a new light in their eyes. They had heard the very beating of her heart, and they loved her.

CHAPTER XLIV.

REACTION.

"WHAT, all in the dark?"

Mrs Willoughby switched on the light to make sure that her husband was there, and smiled kindly. "You must have been asleep, Giles."

He did not deny the impeachment, which indeed seemed to be borne out by the intense physical resentment in his whole attitude and expression.

When she had seated herself in his revolving chair, he rose without speaking, turned off the light again, and went back slowly to the fireside.

"You won't mind dining alone to-night, dear?"

"Suppose I do?" The words were spoken quietly, gravely almost; but they broke like a rifle-shot through the conventional acquiescence of their domestic intercourse.

Mrs Willoughby laughed, uncertain how to take the unaccustomed move. Her laugh ran into set lines about the mouth; but otherwise she had not changed so very much since the old days. Her fair face had become somewhat bleached and stiffened; the smooth hair was almost aggressively smooth; but that was all. Nothing in her appearance bore any legible witness to the disappointed hopes and lost ideals through which she had come to be what she was.

"Suppose I do?" he repeated.

She looked at him enquiringly.

"Stay at home this evening, Alice. I want to talk to you." Dr Willoughby did not often employ that tone of gentle masterfulness in speaking to his wife, useful as he found it when dealing with his women patients.

For a moment he thought it was going to succeed; but it had come too late.

She smiled with the air of one who chooses the higher duty, and drew out her watch. "The carriage won't be round for twenty minutes," she said, "but I must go then. You see, dear, they are counting on me to speak at this meeting. We want to make a special effort."

Giles set his teeth. For the first time, he realized the growing revolt in his soul against these "special efforts."

He did not seem in a hurry to avail himself of the twenty minutes, and she was the first to speak. "I have had a heartrending interview with Dawson," she said. "You can't possibly mean it."

"I certainly do mean it."

"What has he done?"

"He is paid to be civil, and he chose to be uncivil."

"To *you?*"

Giles did not reply.

"Not to you! Why, dear, he is devoted to you—to both of us; and so interested in the causes we have at heart——!"

Giles shifted his position with a sudden sense of nausea. "Oh, he has learnt the patter right enough," he said.

"*Giles!*"

Dr Willoughby rose and leaned against the mantel-piece. It seemed incredible at the moment that a form which was dead for him might still contain life for another. "In God's name, Alice," he said, "let us lay aside convention for the first time in our married life. You like Dawson because he talks of the will of God and the salvation of souls. Does that make him a Christian? The sleek, pampered, overfed—cur! An expression has been running in my mind for the last hour about"—he hesitated—"the venture of faith——"

"I don't think the expression is in the Bible," she said with severe lips.

"Oh, confound the Bible!"

Mrs Willoughby rose to leave the room, but her husband walked across and leaned his back against the door. "*Sit down!*" he said in a tone of unutterable weariness. "Can't you see what I mean? Are you never weary of these words, words, words, that can be forged by any lying idiot? . . . Is it no venture to go out without gold or scrip, no venture to take no thought, no venture to sell all we have and give to the poor?"

"Surely our Lord did not mean those words to be of universal application?"

"So we never apply them at all. Letter and spirit, we consign them to the limbo of oblivion."

"You are very hard on poor Dawson."

"Dawson?" He looked puzzled. "I had forgotten that the creature existed. I was thinking of you and me. I suppose we are all three in the same boat?"

"I hope so."

He smiled cynically. "It is a magnificent vessel," he said,—"a floating palace, with every luxury ready to one's hand. We've booked our passage safe enough,

and there are such a lot of us on board that it must be all right. We are eating and drinking and talking and making music, and we never even hear the rush of water at the keel."

"What *do* you mean, Giles?"

"I was thinking—this isn't the way the saints of old got to Heaven. It seems to me as if the Psalmist—for instance—had made his way there on a raft—all alone."

"He lived before the light of the Gospel."

"Then all I can say is—so much the better for him!"

"Do you realize that you are talking blasphemy?"

"Very likely. Let me finish first what I have to say, and then we'll sit in judgment on it. What does it cost you to address mothers' meetings and pray in public? A little fatigue, perhaps; but worldly amusements cost as much, and give less satisfaction. What does it cost me to go regularly to church and take the chair at missionary meetings? It is a weariness to the flesh, no doubt. I would often rather be here; but it is the form of advertisement that has brought me most of my patients. You and Dawson and I are *doing the thing that pays*." He honestly did not realize at the moment the injustice of placing his wife in the same category with Dawson,—or even with himself.

"Would you have us go forth as beggars?"

He laughed drearily. "We'd make an odd trio. Look here, Alice; I hadn't the least notion of shocking you when I began. I was honestly wondering when you came in what good thing we could do that wouldn't 'pay' in the cheapest sense of the word."

"Yes?"

He looked rather sheepish. "I can't say ideas came in profusion. We live in such a highly-educated *entourage* that most of the things I could think of only promised to increase our popularity. But one thing did occur to me. I had an old college chum,—Dalzell. He has gone to the dogs most awfully; his women-kind are in abject despair. They maintain that I am the one human being who has the smallest restraining influence on him."

"Then you have spoken to him, no doubt?"

"Oh, yes; I've *spoken*—till I became too much taken up with other things to do even that."

"Shall *I* go and see him? I have got a little book just now that might be of real use. Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Dr Willoughby smiled. "I doubt if you would achieve a great deal. He doesn't take much stock in 'little books.' I can undertake that he will keep straight under my eye; but I can undertake no more than that. The only chance would be to have him living with us here."

"Here—in this house?"

"Yes."

"But—is he respectable?"

Giles laughed drearily again. "Oh, dear, no!" he said. "We might coat him over with a thin veneer; but it would crack and peel on the smallest provocation, unless"—the speaker's face was inscrutable,—"he were really converted."

"But you are forgetting the people we have about the house,—your students, my young women. We are bound to consider them."

"True. We are bound to consider them."

"And it might be years before this man responded

to our kindness and prayers sufficiently to stand on his own feet."

"Most true. And only one soul saved in the end. Oh, I quite admit it is easier to mow down a sheaf of hysterical girls at a sweep."

"Is he unconverted or is he a backslider?"

A sudden flame leapt up from the fire, and Giles looked full in her eyes. "*God knows!*" he said slowly.

Mrs Willoughby hesitated miserably. "There are so many souls waiting to be saved," she said.

"And you want to know what special claim this soul has? Well, I'll tell you. Many years ago he appealed to me for help—moral—spiritual—what you will; he held my note of hand, so to speak. I was bound to save him. But, instead of that, I kicked the hand with which he was clinging to the rock, and he fell. The metaphor is mixed; but I fancy the meaning is clear. Now you know."

"Oh, Giles!"

There was no answer.

"Is he poor?"

"Yes."

"Then don't you think we might pay for his board in some Christian home where the money would be an object? It would be a double charity, and you could visit him,—we could both visit him——"

There was a knock at the door, and Dawson entered with letters on a silver salver. He sniffed audibly as he handed them to his master. Then he turned to Mrs Willoughby. "I beg your pardon, madam, but the carriage has been waiting some time," he said obsequiously.

Dr Willoughby looked up with the old affectionate

manner. "Don't let me keep you one moment," he said. "Be careful not to catch cold on coming out."

Mrs Willoughby left the room, followed by the servant. "I would not take too seriously anything your master may have said in a moment of irritation, Dawson," she said in a low voice; "and above all don't talk of it. We can always rely on your discretion, I know. He is not at all himself to-night; but I hope and pray that all may be well to-morrow."

CHAPTER XLV.

A CULPRIT.

For weeks the shadow hung over the school. Most of the teachers and pupils seemed to have forgotten all about the unpleasant little episode, but—even if Vera had been able to do so—Mrs Bright's letters were a constant reminder. She was convinced that the money could not have been lost, and she urged Vera to unravel the mystery for the sake of the school. At last, when hope was almost dead, the shadow seemed to clear away. A little scullery-maid confessed that she had taken the money. It was very sad, of course, but the girl was an obviously incomplete type of humanity, pretty—what there was of her—in a flimsy fashion, like a wild rose half-nipped in the bud. "One might as well break one's heart over the moral condition of a magpie," said Judith; and, although Vera was far from echoing the statement, she could not shut her eyes to the element of truth it contained.

It was a relief to descend to a homelier plane of feeling and decide what was to be done with the girl until Mrs Bright's views could be ascertained. Of course she could not remain at the school. As was her way in matters of the kind, Vera sent for her faithful henchman, Betsy, and to her she related the story at length.

It was some time before Betsy committed herself to an opinion. "I doobt ye've no got to the bottom o' it yet," she said at last.

Vera pushed back her chair with sudden petulance. "Really, Betsy," she said, "you are the most depressing person it has ever been my lot to meet. No suspicion had fallen on the girl. She is a poor little half-witted scullery-maid, whom one must not blame too severely. She confesses of her own accord that she took the money to send to a sweetheart in trouble. Think how dreadful it would have been if one of the teachers or pupils had been the thief! My mind is relieved of a horrible anxiety, and now you come and tell me I've not got to the bottom of it yet."

Betsy surveyed her former mistress with calm criticism. "I doobt ye'd no tak' my words sae ill, if ye wasna thinkin' the same yersel'."

"I doobt" from Betsy usually heralded a statement heavy with relentless certainty.

An indignant word rose to Vera's lips, but she suppressed it. "Go on," she said resignedly.

"I've aye said Jenny was no the one for a place like this. She's no that ill, but she's saft. I wouldna wunner but she'd gi'en her sweetheart mair nor money."

"Poor thing!"

"Puir thing!" repeated Betsy scornfully. "Na, na. Let's ca' things by their names. Money or no money, I'm sair mistà'en if he iver marries her noo."

"Then he ought to be horsewhipped."

"Ah, weel!" Betsy would not commit herself to an opinion on that score. "It's the way they're made; and it's maistly the women that's to blame."

Vera's face flushed and she spoke very quietly. "I

quite agree that if it had been you, Betsy, it would have been you that was to blame."

"*Me!*"

The flush on Vera's face deepened. "You *or me*, if you prefer it," she said.

Betsy tossed her head in impatience of the hypothesis, and, when she spoke again, her attack came from an unexpected quarter.

"What w'y is your wee Mademoiselle sae muckle ta'en up wi' a lassie like yon?"

"Mademoiselle? I never saw her speak to the girl."

"I believe that." Betsy leaned forward and spoke impressively. "Mademoiselle and Jenny was in oor wood thegither on Sawbath afternoon."

"They must have met by chance."

"Nae doobt. An' by chance they talked for an hour or mair, and by chance—Mademoiselle was greetin'."

"Did you see them?"

"I've seen them that did."

Vera rose indignantly from her chair. "It's not like you, Betsy, to listen to gossip like that."

"When the guid God made me, He pit nae lids to my ears."

"Apparently not. You think because that poor little woman is French that she is capable of anything. Do you know she is a heroine? She worked herself half to death for a paralyzed brother, and you should see the testimonials Mrs Bright got from her teachers before she came here."

"I've nae faith in heroines ava."

The door opened. "If you please, ma'am,—Lady Laurie."

Vera was glad to bring the conversation to a close. "Ask her if she will kindly come up here," she said;

"and bring tea, please. You will have some in the housekeeper's room, won't you, Betsy? Goodbye. Don't be narrow-minded. I know you will speak of this to no one but me."

"I'll no speak of it to you till ye speir at me again. But ye'll no can leave the matter here. She's no heroine, Jenny; but the puir bit fule has her rights. It's her mither I'm thinkin' o'. She's a freen' o' my ain."

Lady Laurie came in, smiling, motherly. "How pleasant you are here! I never dared to drop in on Mrs Bright like this. And yet rumour says you are a saint."

"A rumour to that effect may generally be taken as a certificate to the contrary."

"May it? I have no experience, always having been above suspicion."

"If you had been in this room a minute sooner, you would have found me shamefully irritable and ill-tempered, and that with a person who was conscientiously performing a difficult duty."

"Poor you! I don't wonder you got irritable and ill-tempered. Well, I am glad you retain a kindly tolerance for other people's weaknesses."

Vera smiled. "I am afraid I retain a still more kindly tolerance for my own."

"Fiddle-de-dee! By the way, what an imposing place the new school is! They say it is a shocking piece of jerry-building,—Mrs Bright always tries to get too much for her money;—but it looks magnificent. I hear you are going to have a wonderful house-warming."

"Yes, indeed; we are working away at a play and a French *proverbe*."

"That will be quite in your line. Is that the 'Scotsman'? Thank you. I have been hearing such a tragic story. Ah, here it is. "'Suicide on the line.' It was a Mr Dalzell. Dr Willoughby was telling me about it. They were old college chums, and the doctor is dreadfully cut up. The news came in while I was in his consulting-room."

"Who was Mr Dalzell?"

"Oh, *he* was nobody. But Dr Willoughby thinks he might have done more for him. I told him it was absurd; but it shows how much real goodness there is in what his enemies call mere professional urbanity. I forget whether you know Dr Willoughby? Aline does."

"I have met him."

"I never saw so much of the real man before. The cynicism does not go very deep."

Vera did not feel called upon to respond.

"But I did not come here to talk about suicides and Dr Willoughby. I am here in the capacity of fault-finding grandmother. Look."

She produced a French exercise in which several errors had been left uncorrected. "You know I hailed Mademoiselle's appearance with rapture. She spoke beautifully, and she made the girls speak. *Mais ça*"—she struck the page with a dainty lorgnette—"*c'est un peu trop fort!* It isn't ignorance, of course; she must be in love."

Vera's face darkened as she looked at the exercise. "I will speak to her."

"Oh, don't take it so seriously as all that. I have been in love myself. But she does need pulling up. She is the weak point in your machinery. The girls say she began well, but she is growing frightfully

absent-minded,—sets up a chorus of titters sometimes by correcting their *English* pronunciation. Well, really, you know, she had better leave that to others."

As soon as the visitor was gone, Vera sent for Mademoiselle. It was some minutes before her summons was obeyed, and the delay made her speak more sharply than she had intended.

"This exercise has been returned to me," she said, "by a purchaser who happens to be a judge of the article she is paying for. Most of them take us on trust." She stopped short, observing for the first time the girl's excessive paleness.

"Bring me all the exercises you have," she said more gently. "We will go over some of them together."

"Now?"

"Now—certainly."

"My head aches so to-day."

"I am sorry for that, but you and I have often worked through a headache before now; and I must ask you to waste no time."

Mademoiselle returned, looking sick with apprehension, and Vera's heart smote her. How often she had felt as this girl looked! After all, the head-mistress was one thing, the erring suffering woman was another. There was a new kindness in her voice when she spoke again.

"I expect all the teachers to work well," she said, "but I am doubly responsible for you. You are my own discovery. I am sure there is nothing you wish to hide. If things are not as they should be, we will recognize the fact and begin again."

A short time before, the words would have drawn forth something as near a caress as the French girl dared venture upon. To-day she merely shrugged her shoulders and looked miserable.

Vera became the head-mistress again, and the examination began.

It revealed nothing very flagrant. There were only one or two oversights as serious as those Lady Laurie had pointed out; but the frown on Vera's brow grew deeper. "Do you talk over these corrections with your pupils?"

"Sometimes."

"What does 'sometimes' mean? How often? Once in two cases—or five—or ten?"

"I don't know."

"Because, taking the corrections as they stand, I call this lukewarm teaching. There is no expectancy of progress in it. No recognition of a step gained. You began well: what hindered you? Look at the construction of this sentence, and you haven't even marked it 'good'!"

"She got that from the book we are reading."

"Precisely; and applied it correctly. Isn't that what you want them to do?"

"I suppose so."

Vera pushed back her chair. "What has come to you, Mademoiselle? You are not the plucky girl I spoke to in Paris."

"I told you my head aches," said the girl resentfully.

Vera put the books together. "Go and lie down," she said quietly, "and when your head is well, come and talk the matter over again. In the meantime I must ask you to bring the exercise-books to me for the future before returning them to your pupils."

Mademoiselle pressed her handkerchief to her eyes. "My head always aches here," she said, "and I can't sleep. If you don't trust me, I had better go back to France."

"Have I not trusted you? And surely, if my trust is to last, it is you who must keep it growing, not I."

"It is no use. I can't please you."

"Sit down," said Vera. "I want to tell you something. When I first met you in Paris, I had a sentimental idea that life was not treating me in accordance with my deserts. I was feeling my burden intolerable; but when I saw how gallantly you were shouldering yours, I felt ashamed of my own weakness. What has come to you since then? Be frank with me: forget for a moment that I have a right to call you to account, and speak to me as your friend. Have I been too harsh?—Have I failed to give you a fair chance, or said anything more severe than I was entitled to say?"

Mademoiselle did not lift her eyes. Her brow was moist, and her breathing laboured. "I hate your England," she said.

"No," said Vera with quiet conviction. "You don't hate our England. You don't even hate me, though I have found fault with you so frankly. What you hate is something that has happened—something you have done—since you came here." She was led on from phrase to phrase by the growing consciousness in the girl's face. Was it possible that after all there was something in what Betsy had said? "Mademoiselle," she said with sudden resolution, drawing her bow at a venture, "I want to know what is at the bottom of your relation with Jenny Smith."

Here was no adventuress,—no hardened criminal. Mademoiselle's dainty little figure seemed to shrink and cower, a red flush burned in patches on her face: she tried to speak, but a dry click was the only sound that came.

There was a moment of agonizing silence, and then Vera took a step forward and laid a hand on her shoulder. "*You poor, poor child!*" she said.

And then came a torrent of tears. "Oh," cried the girl, "I am not a thief, indeed, indeed, I am not. How could I confess? I never before took a *sou* that was not my own. But who in England knows that? They would all have judged me by that one act. 'Thief,' they would have said; and I am not a thief. Oh, do you know what it is all in a moment to do something that was not *in* you before?"

Vera stood looking at her, an infinite pity in her eyes. It would have been very easy to evade the question, or to leave it unanswered altogether. She did neither. "Yes," she said quietly. "I do know."

"Then you will have pity. You won't be hard. What is it to this girl? What would she ever have made of her life? She is none the worse."

Vera turned away with a little gesture of pain. "Tell me all about it," she said. "Don't keep anything back this time."

The story was so simple that it might almost have been guessed beforehand; and this was well, for Mademoiselle's recital was broken and incoherent. She had incurred serious debts during her brother's last days, and her first quarter's salary—advanced by Mrs Bright at Vera's request—had been spent on the essentials of an outfit. She had meant to pay every penny in the end; but it had seemed the simplest plan just

to slip away from Paris without too many explanations and promises. Was she not going almost into another world? But unfortunately the landlady had discovered her address, and since then she had been subjected to an intolerable persecution.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted to; but, just when I had brought my courage to the point, you seemed so severe and far-off. I did not know what they could do to me here, and I was beside myself with anxiety. It is so terrible *not to know*."

"Poor child! Well?"

"The day after Mrs Bright went away I passed her door, and I thought I would just look in. It seemed such a nice room; I wondered whether it was to stand empty all the time she was gone. I slipped open one of the drawers just to see if she had emptied them——"

Vera made an involuntary movement, and the story became quite incoherent in consequence. There, in the drawer, had lain poor Mademoiselle's fate. She knew the meaning of that envelope, for she had received one just like it in Paris a short time before. The money, of course, had been taken out——? No; there it was—four crisp new notes, the blessed symbol of food and clothing and medicine,—and sleep and peace of mind.

"You see, if I had had a minute to reflect, I never could have done it; but I had not time to think there was such a thing as stealing. I had been thinking money, planning money, dreaming money, and—there was money."

For a few minutes the silence was broken only by the girl's sobs. It seemed as though she never

could find courage and self-control to proceed; but at last she pulled herself together. "I was thrusting the notes into my pocket, when I raised my eyes to the glass,—and saw Jenny behind me!"

"Well?" Vera's voice was full of pity now.

"It was all over in a moment. I held out one of the notes, and she took it. So, you see, it is not as if she was innocent."

"Oh, Mademoiselle," cried Vera. "Surely, surely, you see that that was just the worst thing of all? Who knows what motives may have rushed through the poor little immature mind?—loyalty to you—shame of professing a higher moral standard than a woman she admired——"

"She wanted money too."

"And ever since she has been entreating you to confess?"

"It was easy for her—a servant girl. What had she to lose? And you had promised to befriend her."

At that moment the school gong went for supper. The sound brought with it a sickening realization of the world outside.

"Oh!" Mademoiselle dropped on her knees. "Befriend *me*. Give me a chance! I am so lonely. Remember it was you who sought me out, not I you."

Vera raised the poor limp figure from the floor. "That is true," she said, "and I am not likely to forget it. Go to your room, and I will send you a cup of tea. If you feel well enough, come back at nine o'clock. I will do nothing without letting you know beforehand."

CHAPTER XLVI.

WRESTLING.

LEFT alone, Vera rang the bell and gave a few orders. Then she locked the door and walked over to the window. Her face was worn as if with nights of watching.

She felt through all her being the strength of the temptation to which the French girl had succumbed. She was appalled to think that she even realized the force of Mademoiselle's argument. What *was* it to Jenny?—a poor little slavey with a half-developed mind. How easy to make it good to her! But, right down the ages, the words rang out—categorical, unqualified—"*Take heed that ye offend not one of these little ones!*"

She had often unconsciously prided herself on her charity, her sympathy, her mercy. All the history of her life disposed her to virtues such as these. And now God had put the sceptre in her hand, and required her to judge righteously.

She fell on her knees. "God," she moaned, "I am a sinner. Who am I to sit in judgment on others?"

A quotation from Browning haunted her, and she took the book from its shelf.

> "Have I to dare?—I ask, how dared this Pope?
> To suffer?—Such an one, how suffered he?

> Being about to judge, as now, I seek
> How judged once, well or ill, some other Pope;
> Study some signal judgment that subsists
> To blaze on, or else blot, the page which seals
> The sum up of what gain or loss to God
> Came of His one more vicar in the world.
> So, do I find example, rule of life;
> So, square and set in order the next page,
> Shall be stretched smooth o'er my own funeral cyst."

And so on to the fine lines,—

> "God, who set me to judge thee, meted out
> So much of judging faculty, no more:
> Ask Him if I was slack in use thereof!"

"Happy Pope!" she said. "He was not weakened by his own past."

And then, not with all the intoxicating gladness of that night in Paris, but with quiet, steady assurance, came back the conviction that the man who has committed his present and future into the hands of God may well leave his past there too. She had not chosen Him: it was He who had chosen her; and, if He elected to work with a faulty instrument, that was His concern, not hers.

When the French girl returned, Vera was looking calm and resolute. "Sit down," she said kindly. "I suppose we have both been thinking this matter over. We must put our conclusions together now, and see what we can make of them. What do you propose?"

Mademoiselle leaned forward, a hungry light in her eyes. "You will be merciful," she said; "I know you will. The first time I saw you, I thought how strong and kind you looked. You know how poor I was, you say I was brave, and—the struggle was so

long and so hard! Is it any wonder I was weary,—off my guard? You *do* believe that I am not a bad woman—not a thief! Give me a chance! This is the first real chance I ever had in my life. I will refund the whole twenty pounds little by little. I will pay Jenny anything you like. Only trust me again, and keep my secret. Don't tell Mrs Bright! *I cannot face that;* but if you will have mercy,"—Mademoiselle had not listened to Vera's appeals for nothing—"you help me to believe that God is good; you make this the beginning of a new life for me."

Her speech came in a torrent, and then there was a long silence. Vera was dimly aware of the insincerity of the last words.

"You were brave," she said quietly, "and, if you had been 'bad,' you would not have been so miserable. I think circumstances tried you sorely. But we must face things as they are, and not as they might have been. If the money had been mine, the question might stand on a different footing; but Mrs Bright is the injured person, and we have no right to ignore the fact that she has a *legal claim against you.* Do you understand all that means? You would not have her think that her claim was against Jenny only?" She paused, full of compunction. "Are you able to refund the money now?"

"You know I am not,—at this moment I am penniless,—but if you would let me work quietly on——"

"I think you forget that I am in a position of trust."

Mademoiselle shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "You talk as if I were a common thief,—and you have admitted that I am not that. Who would be the worse? And,—if your motive was one of mercy——"

"My dear girl, I have no right to dispose of mercy

that is not mine. There is only so much in the power of each of us. But try not to think of my mercy or want of mercy. Think of your own courage and justice. If you do the brave thing now,—I don't think you will need my poor help to convince you that God is good. . . . And then there is Jenny. It is quite true that you can make things up to her in a material way. But what of her character—her moral sense —her faith?"

"Her faith!" Mademoiselle's lip curled.

"She had faith enough to urge you to confess, and, failing, to take the whole burden on her own shoulders."

"You worked on her feelings. You came back on the subject in one way or another every Sunday evening at prayers—just when one is feeling so low. You would have made me confess too, if I had been a coward." With a sudden impulse of impatience the French girl rose to her feet. "*Mon dieu,* Mademoiselle, why do you always talk as if we were in church? Look at life as it is, and you will see that all such arguments are mere pedantry!"

"Are they?" Vera's voice was very low. "Then take it from your own point of view. You have suffered horribly since you took that money."

"That I have!"

"Is anything worth such suffering? You know it is not. And you can't really get rid of it without paying the price. My dear girl, I think you see that you must tell Mrs Bright. She will not be hard; she may even give you another trial——"

"And she might write to my convent, or give me away before the whole school. She might even send me to prison. Can you answer for it that she won't?"

"If you put it like that," said Vera, "of course I can *answer* for nothing, except that she will wish to be just —and kind."

But the girl had sprung to her feet, her cheeks blazing with passion. "Oh," she cried, "how would you like to be treated as you are treating me? It is all such fine talk: I too in your place could say the same, but I would not stoop to be so cruel. You also, you protestants, pray, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.'"

Vera's eyes were full of tears. "That is true," she said. "Do you think this is costing me nothing? But,—even if I were out of the question,—what of Jenny? Can you hope that she would continue to bear the whole blame?"

"She likes me, and I would make it worth her while, —and, besides, who would believe the word of a girl like that?"

"*Mademoiselle!*" cried Vera, "One half of you is generous and brave. Be true to that half!"

But the girl was scarcely listening.

"You promised poor Madame you would befriend me," she cried, "and this is how you keep your word! Oh, I would to God I had never seen you!"

Vera took her hand. "It is hard, I know," she said, —"terribly hard, . . . a long, long step. But if you could only find courage to take it, it would give you such a splendid fresh start."

Mademoiselle smiled bitterly. "That is the kind of fresh start that it is so easy to recommend to another. How would you like to make that kind of fresh start yourself?" Her eyes narrowed with an expression Vera had never seen in them before, and in her excitement she literally gasped for breath. "Suppose you

begin with the events of a winter at St Vincent long, long ago!"

Vera did not move, nor did her expression change. The words seemed to petrify her where she stood. But the familiar room slipped away from her eyes, and she felt herself alone on a tiny rock in the midst of eternity. She could not have told whether it was a second or an hour before she said quietly, "What do you mean?"

The girl looked frightened, but she held her ground. "I think you know what I mean."

Vera walked over to the window and looked out. "You are too excited to talk more now," she said. "Go to bed. I will see you again to-morrow."

When the girl was gone, she wiped the cold sweat from her brow, and swallowed a mouthful of water.

So it had come. She had been looking out for it, dreading it, flying from it for so long, and here it was. Strange that she did not feel it more. It had come. That was all she knew. The bell for prayers would ring presently. Well, she must conduct prayers as usual. She must go on just as before until she had made up her mind what to do.

She was surprised that it was not more difficult to go on. One or two of the teachers looked at her oddly, she fancied; but that did not alarm her. What could her face reveal but the blankness of the mind behind it?

"I must sleep before I try to think," she said; and, undressing as quickly as she could, she threw herself on the bed.

Sleep came at once, and stayed with her for an hour or two. Then she awoke with every faculty in full activity.

It had come.

Hastily she lighted a candle lest the darkness should swallow her up. It was useless to hope or pray for more sleep that night.

It had come.

She thought of the position she held, of Mrs Bright's trust in her, of the appreciation the parents had shown for her work, of the love and respect of most of the teachers and pupils, of how she had spoken to them in faltering words about ascending into the hill of the Lord. How would all that appear to them now? She thought of Eric with his chivalrous worship of her; of Harold's shy "I have faith in *you* anyhow, Donna Vera"; of her earnest words of warning to Aline; of Judith—in all the happiness of first love.

This was the world into which *it had come.* The new element must be fitted into every relation of life.

Vera sprang out of bed in agony. Surely it could not be possible. She had dreamed it so often. Yes; but this time it was real.

What was real? Let her think it over calmly. What had happened? She had been acting as if that old story was blazoned all over the world. What had actually been said?—and who had said it?—and how much had she herself tacitly admitted?

"*Suppose you begin with the events of a winter at St Vincent long, long ago?*"

The sweat started to her brow again,—each drop like a spark of fire—as she recalled the words. Yes; but who had said them? Only a little French—*thief.* None of the teachers liked Mademoiselle: the girls, it appeared, tittered during her class; Lady Laurie had justly found fault with her work. Even sup-

posing she knew all, who would take her word against that of Vera Carruthers? No one.

And what had she—Vera—admitted? Nothing, absolutely nothing. She could not have acted so well if she had foreseen what was to come.

With a gasp of relief she saw the real state of affairs. What a fool she had been to get so frightened! And besides, poor little Mademoiselle was at her mercy. It could do her no good to wreck Vera's life. All she wanted was peace, and a little money, and—perhaps—permission to go. She—Vera—had been in despair,—and yet a mere banker's draft would mean deliverance.

She laughed a shuddering little laugh of inexpressible relief. "Thank God!" she cried.

But was it for this she had striven and prayed?—for this she had asked herself each morning, "How can I, in the duties and opportunities of this day, fulfil the will of God?" Was it for this she had chosen the Kingdom of God and His righteousness?

"*Thank God!*" she said defiantly again.

No: the words were out of place. They would not do. God was not here. If she took this way of escape, she left Him behind. She had seen so clearly the sin of sacrificing poor Jenny's moral sense to Mademoiselle's safety; and now the problem was simply repeated on a slightly larger scale.

The conclusion was too awful. Hour after hour she struggled to evade it. Again and again it seemed that she had found a working compromise; but it would not do.

Mademoiselle's word here was worthless. If the charge were made, it would scarcely need even a formal denial. But behind Mademoiselle's trumpery

accusation was the truth; and the eternal voice went on inexorably, "Walk before Me, and be thou sincere." Could she deny the charge? "Yes, yes, yes —a thousand times yes!" cried Vera. But the voice in her heart said, No.

If the temptation had come on one of the days when the Eternal City stands clear, all might have been so easy; but a mist hung over the river to-day, and she could not see beyond.

She recalled her words to Mademoiselle,—"It is hard, I know,—terribly hard—a long, long step. But, if you could only find courage to take it, it would give you such a splendid fresh start." Vera dropped her head on her outstretched arms, and laughed in utter mockery of her own inadequate words.

No; there were no legions of angels to-day. For all she could tell, she might have been fighting the battle alone.

She dozed a little towards morning, and, when she awoke, her interview with Giles Willoughby was full in her mind. "Be a good man, Giles! When I think I have turned a soldier of God into a mere successful man,—I just *can't bear* it." How had she dared to use such words?—she, who had failed so miserably when circumstances put her to the test.

Had she failed? No, not yet. The way was open still.

Ever since that night in Paris she had walked, as it were, on a plank, with the solid earth beneath. But now the earth had rolled away, and the plank spanned the abyss.

The question was whether the heavenly vision was worth *just this*.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE WAY OF ESCAPE.

"MADEMOISELLE asked me to tell you that she does not feel well enough to come down this morning." Judith wondered as she spoke whether Mademoiselle felt as ill as Vera looked.

"I am sorry. Tell her I will come and speak to her by-and-by."

It was natural that the two women should meet coldly, were it only in sheer reaction from the emotionalism of the day before. Each took in silence the measure of the other. Their hour had come.

"Well," said Vera, "we did a great deal of talking yesterday. To-day we must fasten off all the loose ends."

"Yes."

"Have you made up your mind?"

"Have *I* made up my mind?" The girl's amazement was curiously naïve. Evidently Miss Carruthers meant to carry the affair with a high hand. No matter: Mademoiselle's turn would come. "I have been wondering," she said with a sinister tightening of the lips, "whether *you* had made up *your* mind."

"I am sorry you wasted time over that. I meant to make my meaning clear yesterday. It is for Mrs Bright to settle this question, not for me. It would

be infinitely better if you would make a clean breast of it yourself, and leave yourself in her hands. If you don't, you force me to tell her what I know."

Mademoiselle raised herself on her elbow. "Do you know what you are doing?" she said.

"If you mean, Do I see it in all its bearings?—I suppose not. Do we ever?"

"Do you know what you are *risking?*"

Vera looked straight into the girl's eyes. "Mademoiselle," she said, "if you have anything to say, I will listen; but it seems to me unfitting that you should put questions to me." She hesitated, and then added firmly, "You seem to be meditating some action on your own account. Very good; but, if you act, you act in the dark and on the chance."

"Do you know who I am?"

"That is another question, is it not?"

"I think you knew my mother at least." Mademoiselle drew a photograph from under her pillow. It was scratched and faded, but had once been an effective representation of the golden-haired lady.

Vera felt the blood rush to her face as she thought of the memories it called forth. Poor, generous, faithless old Madame! Clearly she was one of those who never know whether they are keeping a confidence or not. Vera could not conceal the blush. That much she owed to her humanity; but her voice was very quiet as she replied, "No photograph that you can show me has anything to do with this case."

"Ah, you think you can defy me! You have a name, a standing; and who am I?"

"I try not to think of you at all." Her voice softened. "I think you can see that I am simply trying to do my duty."

The Frenchwoman looked sullen and half baffled.

"So now," Vera said, "we return to my first question,—'Have you made up your mind?'"

There was a long silence.

"Will you give me three days to think it over?"

Vera was glad of the breathing-space herself. There was so much to be considered. If only the Raeburns had been at home that she might talk the matter over with them! But, as it chanced, they were spending a short holiday in Italy. She had a crushing conviction that Mademoiselle knew the whole story; but after all what did it matter how much she knew? The vaguest accusation would be enough, if she—Vera—were not prepared to deny it. *And she would not lie.* Her mind was made up. To lie now would be to turn her back on all the light she had received. Any day, any hour, Harold might come to her and say, "Good Heavens, Vera! why don't you contradict this woman's vile slander?" And she would be forced to reply, "I don't contradict it because it is no slander: it is true." The thought was intolerable. No: she would not have her brothers and sisters hear the truth from this woman. She would tell them herself, and then, in a sense, she would be free. The rest of the world seemed very far away in comparison.

Mademoiselle repeated her question. "Will you give me three days to think it over?"

"Yes," Vera said. "On condition that you get up, and go on quietly with your work,—I will."

As she was leaving the room, Mademoiselle sprang from the bed and caught her by the hand. "Miss Carruthers," she cried, "you can't mean it! Think of the school,—think of your position, your reputation!—

and of me with my way to make! And on the other hand, only that poor little Jenny!"

Vera's face was sad enough to satisfy even her opponent. "Jenny has a human soul, like you and me; and, if she hadn't, truth is truth."

"It is a painful thing sometimes."

Vera met the eager eyes again. "So be it!" she said simply.

"That is your last word?"

"That is my last word."

Well, it was done. She had burned her boats. There was no going back. But, as she realized the fact, a sense of infinite consolation came over her weary heart. She had failed: her sin had found her out: she was beaten. It was only fair. But, whatever happened, God would not be beaten.

And then came the gracious tears, and the uttermost surrender of assent.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

IN A PLACE OF DARKNESS.

"BUT, good God!" cried Harold, leaping to his feet, "you must stop the woman's mouth,—that's all. Bribe her: ship her out of the country. Why the devil didn't you tell me this before?"

He looked round for the bell; but Vera stretched out her hand to prevent him. Her face was haggard and drawn. "Mademoiselle is safe in bed," she said. "We have time to talk it over quietly. But, Harold, my mind is made up."

"I never heard such blasted rot in my life. It's true I told you five minutes ago that life would never be the same to me again; but I suppose in a week I should have been shrugging my shoulders and saying, 'Only one illusion more!' This is another matter. Good Heavens, you must be mad."

She sighed. "I have told you the story step by step just that you might know how I have been led up to this decision. You asked me once whether I believed in God. I am telling you now. It means a good deal to believe in God."

"And apparently a good deal that's dashed unpleasant."

"That's true."

"It is bad enough in all conscience, but surely

you have the decency to see that it is your own affair."

"I do. You forget that it is Mademoiselle who fails to see that."

He made a gesture of impatience. "How on earth you could bring anyone here who knew anything about St Vincent is more than I can divine."

"Oh, I have raved over that too in the night watches. I was grateful to old Madame for her kindness, and for—keeping my secret! And I wanted to help the girl. But nothing could have made any real difference. The situation has been gravitating towards me all along."

"Humbug! One would think you and Gretchen and Mary Magdalene stood alone. How many of the attractive women one meets in the midst of society are a whit better than you? If I were to tell you things that I know for a fact——"

"It would make no difference. But, Harold, don't you see? It is not *that* I am thinking of at all. It is truth." Her face burned. "I have never for twenty-four hours together felt it my duty to make public confession of that old story; but *I am not going to lie about it* if I am asked."

"Better people than you have lied before now. There are other virtues besides truth. What about Mrs Bright and the school?"

Vera bowed her head in uttermost dejection. Even those who judged her least harshly would ask why she had placed herself in such a position. If they knew how she had tried to keep herself out of every position;—but life had to be lived!

"Does it not occur to you that you are abominably

selfish? God will comfort *you*, no doubt; but what is to become of the rest of us?"

She raised her arms with a sudden gesture of despair, and her voice was shaken by a dry sob. "Oh, Harold, if I stood alone, do you think I should be suffering like this?"

He had made a real impression at last, and he pursued his advantage.

"There's Judith to begin with. Engaged to be married, and awfully happy. Well, that's off!"

"You have a high opinion of the faithfulness of your sex."

He turned on her cruelly. "I shouldn't think yours was any higher. Have you told Judith?"

"Yes."

"And what does she say?"

Vera's lips quivered. "She feels it very keenly."

"Then there's Aline. I never approved of her going on the stage. That was your doing. You know the kind of temptation she'll meet in the best of companies. And she's a regular witch. She was repeating to me with tears in her eyes the other day some of your—precepts. Then there's Eric——"

She interrupted him. "I have seen Eric."

"You have? And what does he say?"

Her lip curled in spite of herself. "Oh, he was one of God's angels!"

"Humph! It's a mercy one member of the family is a little more earthly. It takes a man of the world to manage these things."

She did not answer.

"Then—last and least—there's myself. I've had a tremendous stroke of luck lately. I meant to tell you

about it, but this business has put it all out of my head. Willoughby has taken me up."

"Willoughby?"

"It's extraordinary, isn't it, for I'm not one of the dons, and I can't say I shone in his class. I've dined there once or twice, and I've taken the instruments at one or two of his private operations. He says a man ought to choose his own specialty; but, when I have chosen mine, he will do all he can to help me. They say when Willoughby takes a man up, his fortune's made. You know he is the rage in Edinburgh just now, and upon my soul I don't wonder. He is coming out awfully strong. Sometimes I almost think he is sincere."

Vera's face shone like the sun through storm and rain. "Do you? Tell me why."

"Oh, one cannot explain these things. And what does it matter? Willoughby is Mrs Bright's brother, and I've told you the sort of person Mrs Willoughby is. If you persist in this insane resolution of yours, you'll spoil it all."

There was a strange repose in Vera's wan little smile. "Oh, no, Harold, I shan't spoil that."

"Much you know about it! I tell you what, Vera, if you won't listen to reason, you shall yield to force. I am the head of the family, and I won't have this damned folly."

She raised her head calmly. "Force" made a different woman of her in a moment. "How will you prevent it?"

"I'll interview this Mademoiselle."

"Can you promise that I won't tell the truth about this theft? That is what she is afraid of, and she knows me pretty well by this time."

"I'll get her out of the country."

"And every time she is in difficulties for the rest of her life, she will come back upon you. At present I don't even know that she can do me any real harm. I have no idea how much she knows."

"You couldn't even find out that?"

"I couldn't even find out that."

He rose to his feet. "I want writing-paper," he said icily, "and pen and ink."

She made a movement of her head in the direction of the writing-table.

He strode across the room, and for some time she listened to his quill as it drove over the sheets. At intervals he tore the paper in shreds and began again.

It seemed a long time before he rose. "I mean to sleep at the King's Arms," he said; "and I have asked Mademoiselle to meet me there to-morrow at nine. People will think it is professional. She must get the note to-night. Will you say so?"

"No."

He rang the bell.

"Will you give this note to Mademoiselle at once?" he said with his most professional manner.

"Yes, sir," and the discreet parlour-maid withdrew.

"Good-night, Vera."

"Good-night."

He walked to the threshold, hesitated, and turned back. "It's a pity you weren't a man, old girl," he said, and, stooping, he kissed her on the forehead.

Vera had been sitting on a low stool by the fire. She slipped on to the floor now, and lay there with clenched hands in an agony of despair. Nothing mattered any more. She had gone through the worst, and her whole past lay behind her in the blackness of

absolute failure. The words of the old psalm were ringing through her head,—

"*Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit; in a place of darkness, and in the deep.*

"*Thine indignation lieth hard upon me; and Thou hast vexed me with all Thy storms.*

"*Thou hast put mine acquaintance far from me; and made me to be abhorred by them.*

"*I am so fast in prison that I cannot get forth. . . .*

"*My lovers and friends hast Thou put away from me; and hid mine acquaintance out of my sight.*"

An approaching step in the hall roused her.

"If you please, ma'am, I have knocked at Mademoiselle's door and got no answer, so I slipped the note under the door. Was that right?"

"Quite right," said Vera. "I hope you are going off to bed now. You look tired. Good-night."

Meanwhile Harold had found Judith awaiting him in the hall.

"Come into the schoolroom," she said. "I must have a few words with you."

The sight of her innocent young face brought home to him afresh the horror of the situation. "It is awful to think that you should even know of such things."

She shrugged her shoulders. "If that were all!"

"Did you ever hear of such crass insanity?"

"Never. It is terrible to think of the harm she will do. Her influence here has been extraordinarily good. One of the teachers said to me long ago, 'She isn't going to fail us, is she? One so seldom meets people with *strong white wings.*'"

"Have you told Vera that?"

"I should think I had. On my knees, with the tears streaming down my face; and you know I am not given to tears."

"And it didn't affect her?"

"Oh, yes, it did: it affected her tremendously. She was crying too. But she only said, 'Don't you see that you only bind me over all the more?'"

"The fact is she is morbid: she sees things all out of proportion. Why can't she say to Mademoiselle, 'We have no right to wreck the school between us: for the sake of others, let us agree to be silent'? That's good morality, I take it; and altruism to boot. However, there is no use arguing; so I am going to settle the matter myself."

"*Are* you?"

"I shall see Mademoiselle to-morrow, and get her out of the country."

Judith was silent.

"Don't you think I am right?"

"Quite right," she said doubtfully; "but, if you fail, you weaken Vera's position tremendously."

"Oh, I shan't fail."

"The fact is," Judith said drearily, "I have lost all my bearings. I think Vera made lots of mistakes in bringing us up; but her teaching on the subject of truthfulness was most—uplifting. I shall never forget once when—well, when I had lied, how she said to me, 'Own up though it kills you. Hold your head high, and live royally!'"

"Well, she has brought the principle to a jolly *reductio ad absurdum*."

"Hasn't she? And yet, Harold, I can't admit that truth is to blame. I've never told her so, but it is the

simple fact that I owe my place in the Tripos to Vera's teaching about truth. It tells all round."

Harold did not respond. He was thinking gloomily that they were paying a heavy price for Judith's place in the Tripos.

"No," she repeated reflectively, "I am sure the fault doesn't lie with truth. It is just that in life there is no retracing a false step!"

CHAPTER XLIX.

HATS OFF!

A WOOD fire burned cheerily in the deserted old hotel at Avignon, and the aroma of coffee was in the air.

Mr Raeburn tossed his *Matin* aside. "Well, sweetheart," he said heartily, "we have had a famous basking. Now for the north and home!"

Mrs Raeburn did not answer, and he looked at her again. "Bless me, is that a letter or the manuscript of a three-volume novel?"

She raised her eyes. Her face was pale, and she spoke significantly. "It is the first sheets," she said, "of the last act." She held up the letter that he might recognise Vera's handwriting.

"Not really?"

"I am afraid—really." She dashed away a tear. "One sees now the level on which she has been living, if there had been any doubt about it before."

She handed him the first sheet, and for a long time there was silence in the room. Even when he had laid down the letter, he did not speak. His eyes were fixed on the dancing fire.

"All through the night," Vera wrote, "I seem to be picturing the exposure from the point of view of everyone I know: and I ask myself, 'Can it be right to

bring this loss and humiliation on those who have trusted me?' You know the answer. If the gladness,—the joy in the Lord—meant anything, it meant just this. If I compromise now, I act as though the Kingdom of God were a chimera. Is it a chimera? *I don't know!*"

Mrs Raeburn was the first to speak. "What she must have suffered! And not a soul within reach who understood! Isn't it terrible that we should have been away?"

"I was wondering. Suppose she had come to ask our advice?"

Mrs Raeburn hesitated, and finally decided to leave the implied question unanswered. "I can't believe it of Mademoiselle," she said at last. "She seemed a good and generous girl,—and so fond of Vera."

"Perhaps our dear Vera has been a little too uncompromising. For that reason I wish we had been at home. The question, of course, now is how much this woman really knows. Probably not much, and the chances are that she will be able to prove even less. The bow may have been drawn partly at a venture, and, if Miss Carruthers has really taken it as well as she seems to have done,—her reputation will stand a good deal."

"People have forgotten that old story of her refusing to see anyone."

"H'm," he said. "I had forgotten that. How appallingly irrevocable the merest trifles in life are! Every bit has to be worked into the puzzle in the end."

"It would be all right if she would even draw herself up, and say,—'I decline to notice such an accusation.' But I gather from her letter that she won't

even do that,—she won't even tacitly indicate that the story is false."

"On the other hand," he went on, continuing his own line of thought, "if this wretched little adventuress really holds some good trump cards, and if Miss Carruthers is too uncompromising, there will be a terrible *fracas*. I am not an unreserved admirer of Mrs Bright, as you know; but she has worked heroically in the interests of her school, and this new building is a magnificent venture. I confess I shouldn't like to see the whole thing wrecked at this stage."

"My dear Frank! Think of Vera's influence for good all these years. Is that all moral character comes to?"

Perhaps it was natural that, for the moment, the man of the world should be uppermost in Mr Raeburn. "In a woman," he said doggedly, "that is just about what it comes to."

Mrs Raeburn rose. "Well, in any case, I will wire to say we shall be home the day after to-morrow."

"Wait a moment. Don't let us act in a hurry. . . . Suppose you offer yourself as Miss Carruthers' guest for a few days? Your presence in the school would go a long way to reassure people if anything happens, and you might even be able to effect something. She is a wonderful peacemaker, my wife is!"

Naturally there was a digression at this point, and it was a minute or two before he continued, "If the accusation is a vague one, it may be sufficient for you and me to say that we know all the circumstances."

"Frank!" Mrs Raeburn's face shone with loving appreciation. She stopped behind his chair, slipped her arms round his neck, and laid her cheek caressingly against his head,—"You *are* good!"

"I am not good at all," he said drily. "I think we were fools to insist on making Miss Carruthers' acquaintance."

"Oh, if that's all!"

"And I think she is behaving in a most quixotic way. I believe all this could easily have been avoided."

"But——?"

He smiled whimsically. "But, when one actually sees the thing done before one's eyes, I am afraid it is a case of—*Hats off!*"

CHAPTER L.

A REPRIEVE.

NEXT day was the half-term holiday, and most of the teachers and pupils were away. The breakfast-room was nearly empty, and the silence was oppressive.

"Well, I suppose we shall have Mrs Bright home almost any day now," said Fräulein, for the sake of making a little conversation. She looked at Vera; but the usually responsive face was not encouraging.

Nora Glynne—a charming Irish girl with a sweet mutinous mouth—made a grimace. "At least there will be the fun of the flitting and the house-warming"—she looked at Vera, and added *sotto voce*,—"to sweeten the pill."

Fräulein glanced at Miss Carruthers, but the audacious remark had evidently passed unnoticed. She shook her head. "You are very far from being perfect in the *proverbe* yet," she said reprovingly. "We can't have mistakes and promptings when half the town is there to see."

"Oh, I shall be all right. You see I don't get nervous like the others."

"Don't be so cocksure, my child. 'Pride goeth beforc destruction.'"

But the girl only laughed. "I mean to enjoy every minute of it,—if only Mrs Bright does not spoil it all

with her crossness." Mrs Bright's "crossness" represented at that moment the whole mystery of evil in the world to happy Nora Glynne.

Still Vera made no response. Her absence of mind was becoming positively painful.

"Shall I go and look after Mademoiselle?" said Judith abruptly. "Perhaps she has one of her headaches." Judith was feeling strangely nervous about the approaching interview between Mademoiselle and Harold. She would not have been sorry if something had occurred to prevent it.

Vera roused herself with an effort. "No," she said. "Let us finish our breakfast in peace. I will look after Mademoiselle myself presently."

Before the others had finished, she excused herself and went upstairs. A sudden fear seized her at the dead silence which followed her knock. What if she had driven the girl to despair?

Opening the door, she found a deserted room. Odd scraps of paper littered the floor, a trunk stood ready packed, and the open drawers were empty.

Vera's first act was to destroy Harold's note, which lay on the floor unopened. Then, looking round, she found a letter addressed to herself,—

"DEAR MISS CARRUTHERS,

"I have received to-day a little money from an uncle in France, and am returning home at once. I presume you will not think it necessary to have me followed by the police.

"If I had been a clever woman like you, I should have stayed and fought it out; but your calm diplomacy takes my breath away, and—guilty or innocent—you would certainly have got the better of poor me in the

end. I say 'guilty or innocent,' because I will be frank and admit that I do not even now know whether I had a handle against you or not.

"When I was a mere girl, my mother told me the story of a flirtation that took place one winter at St Vincent. She told me how the good landlady befriended an English girl in her sore need; but I was young and ignorant in those days, and I did not ask the English girl's name. One learns, as life goes on, how valuable such scraps of information may prove.

"Of course I should never have thought of you in connection with that girl, if you had not mentioned that you came from St Vincent. Then I looked upon the idea as the wildest fancy; but it fascinated me. I was all anxiety to know whether it was true; but I liked you very much, and I oftened pictured myself as keeping your secret faithfully in spite of every inducement to reveal it. I can be faithful like that when people are good to me.

"I watched every word you said very carefully without getting any clue, till the day you spoke to us about the theft. You spoke then as if you knew what it was to have sinned; and afterwards you admitted that you knew what it was to do something that was not *in* you before. I did not ask the question as a trap; but you answered as if you were making a confession.

"Those were the only mistakes you made. When I showed you my mother's photograph, I could not read your face with any certainty.

"I am going away; but your personality fascinates me, and I must know more about it. I remember my mother had an intimate friend, a naval officer,

who often gave me chocolates before I was sent to the convent. He used to be a great deal at St Vincent, and I think he will know. My mother used to say that nothing ever escaped him.

"But you need not be afraid. I do not mean to expose you. You impress me very much,—all the more if the story is true. You have courage and *savoir-vivre.* If I had possessed as much, I should not now be running away in disgrace.

"I leave my larger box. You will kindly forward it by *petite vîtesse* to an address I will send you. I also leave the key; *because you 'stand in Mrs Bright's place,'* and she might wish you to ascertain that I am not stealing anything more. I don't think you would suspect me on your own account, and it is curious how little I object to the idea of your turning over my private things. You must be very tolerant in your judgment except on the point on which we differed. If you had been just a little different—a little more merciful—I should have been your slave.

"Yes; you might have trusted me; but you preferred to risk all, and you see your great venture has been a success. Pity you were not a man; you might have made a great diplomatist. *Je vous en fais mes compliments!*

"Will our paths ever cross again? Who knows?

"MARIE CHAMOTTON."

All the strength went out of Vera's limbs, and hot tears of relief welled up in her eyes. The school, at least, was safe, and Mrs Bright's trust was not abused.

And this was the end of her acquaintance with poor, plucky, conscienceless, little Mademoiselle. What an extraordinary letter it was,—what a mixture of world-

liness and generosity! All the child wanted was to know some good people; she was capable of seeing life with generous eyes. "This was my chance," Vera said, "and I have thrown it away. She would have been my friend, and I have made her my enemy."

She realized to the full how little Mademoiselle's protestations of fidelity would be worth when she was released from the influence that called them forth. Yes; the school was safe; but, for herself there was no safety of this kind any more. Poor, kindly, weak, faithless, old Madame! Henceforth the world was a hall of a thousand eyes. At any moment, from any quarter, the attack might come, and she must be ready—not to defend herself, but to be true.

Well, she had told her brothers and sisters: the bitterness of death was past. For the future she must wake up each morning with the thought, "To-day it may come." She must stand with her lamp trimmed and her light burning, awaiting—her Day of Wrath.

But in vain do we cry, Lo, here! and Lo, there! When the Son of Man comes, it is apt to be where we looked not for Him.

CHAPTER LI.

THE NEXT STEP.

THE fine new buildings were finished at last, and the opening day had come. The whole school was bright with flowers, and festoons of Chinese lanterns in the garden held out a brilliant promise for nightfall; but the real illumination of the place was the glow of joyous young life which throbbed through all the rooms, and rushed, panting and breathless, over the sunshiny grounds.

With her unfailing instinct for the successful, Mrs Bright had arranged that the festival should coincide with the visit of a great celebrity to the neighbourhood, and the school was to be opened in the afternoon by someone not far removed from royalty.

So the demand for invitations was very great; many parents came from a distance on purpose to be present, and the widespread desire to witness the play induced some of the teachers to suggest a move to the town-hall.

But Mrs Bright would not listen to such a suggestion. It struck her as simply vulgar. "A quiet little school-girls' party!" she said. And, besides, had not the great lecture-hall been built specially with a view to such occasions?

Mrs Bright, looking very prosperous and motherly

in her rich black silk, was a picture of health and good spirits, and she treated with amused tolerance the enthusiasm with which the girls crowded round Vera and poured their anticipations into her ear. A teacher off duty has a most unfair advantage, and Vera's only remaining duty was to superintend the play in the evening.

"Just come into my room, will you?" said the head-mistress. "Such a curious thing has happened. To-day of all days I have got a letter from that little Mademoiselle of yours, enclosing a draft for twenty pounds."

Vera turned pale. "How very strange!"

"So there was good in the girl after all."

"I always knew that."

"If only one felt sure that she had come by the money honestly. You weren't *too* hard on her, were you?"

Vera laughed.

> ("God, who set me to judge thee, meted out
> So much of judging faculty, no more:
> Ask Him if I was slack in use thereof!")

As the words passed through her mind, her face grew very grave. "I don't know," she said. "I tried to be loyal to you. I did not make things easy for myself."

"I am sure of that; but when a woman is young and alone in a strange land, one has to be very careful."

"Yes." Had Mrs Bright *quite* forgotten the letters she wrote at the time?

"Perhaps," said Vera, trying to keep down the note of anxiety in her voice, "she only wants to return to England."

"Ah, that may be. Well, I have no objection, and I don't suppose you have."

It was a long time before Vera answered. "No," she said at last.

Mrs Bright laughed. "You *are* absent-minded."

But Vera had never in her life given her mind more unreservedly to any question. Once more the fact came home with force that for her there must be no making of plans,—no seeing her way. Let other folk do as they would, she must walk a step at a time, with every faculty on the alert for marching orders. So be it! And then, with a great luminous flash, came the thought that *the next step* was all she need think about now, and that for that next step strength would not be wanting. Such truisms have power at times to make the blood leap through our veins! As a mere light-hearted girl, Vera had quoted Carlyle to much the same effect, thinking she understood.

. . . .

When the brief ceremony was over, cricket and tennis became the order of the afternoon, and the grounds were very gay with pretty gowns and the ripple of talk and laughter. Among the distinguished visitors was Mrs Bright's brother, Dr Willoughby of Edinburgh, and it was pretty to see the frank admiration with which his sister looked at him. She felt as if, in some unaccountable way, the good old days had been given back to her.

Vera was tired, and her energies were wanted for the evening, so she withdrew to a quiet corner of the grounds and looked on. At some distance Dr Willoughby was playing with his little Anglo-Indian niece, the spoilt baby of the school.

After a time the child caught sight of Vera, and pro-

ceeded to tug the great man unceremoniously in her direction. For a time he resisted, but little Lulie was in one of her most outrageous moods, and in another moment a scream might have drawn general attention to the episode.

•He lifted his hat. "Is this spoilt scrap to have her way," he asked, "or shall I carry her off bodily?"

Vera smiled. "I think just for to-day the pupils are supposed to do very much what they like."

"I am glad." He sat down and drew a long breath, —and then they both began to talk to the child at their feet.

"I had a friend," he said quite suddenly, "who told me that if you once intruded on a man's spiritual privacy, he was entitled to make you share it for the rest of your life. What do you think?"

Vera meditated. "The rest of your life is a long time. But I think he has every right to return the attack."

"Then tell me," he said slowly,—"how it all came about?"

"How what came about?"

"The change in you."

She did not attempt to deny the change. "Oh, by a miracle," she said, smiling.

He dug his stick into the turf. "I wish a few miracles would come my way."

"Perhaps you don't need them as I did."

"How you scoffed at miracles in the old days!"

Her face was as simple as a child's. "*Therefore I had to be taught.*" A moment later she laughed in the old mischievous fashion. "I exercise a little discrimination even now, you know, but perhaps I looked for miracles on the wrong plane in those days."

It was a curious conversation. To all appearance the two were fully engaged in playing with the child; but through all the variations the *Leitmotif* went on.

"I have been watching you all day. You *do* find life worth living?"

Her voice sank very low. "In my darkest hour I have never thought life was not worth living. I want you to take that admission for all it is worth."

He sighed enviously. "Happy you!—Do you know—Vera—there are times when I could envy you that 'raft' of yours? It is something to have made the great renunciation once for all."

She did not answer immediately.

"Tell me!" he said, with a note of boyish appeal that touched her.

"I suppose it should be easier for me to make it than for you;—I don't need to remind you that things are apt to be worth while in proportion to their difficulty. I was thinking that, in whatever way one makes the great renunciation,—whether with candles and flowers and grave-clothes, or just in some quiet moment that to all appearance is commonplace enough—the little renunciations have still to be made."

"Even you find that?"

"*Even* I! But I suppose the point gained is that we don't need to stop and argue about the little renunciations."

"You see"—he had made quite a deep hole in the turf by this time, and the spoilt child was fortunately finding sufficient employment in the effort to fill it up;—"the trouble with me is that *goodness pays.*"

She smiled with ready comprehension. "It pays with me too very often; but I don't think that

matters. What we have got to do is to take hold of the whole thing by the other end, and then we need not care whether it pays or not."

"By the other end?"

"Yes; as you were trying to take hold of it in the old days—till I came in and spoilt it. I have often wondered just what difference it would have made if you had converted me to your way of thinking instead of my converting you to mine. Not that the arguments were mine at all," she continued, smiling, "but we did not see at the moment that all the powers of nature were at the back of poor little me!"

"Don't, Vera!" He winced.

"No," she said. "I won't. When all is said, I *knew* that life meant more than that."

A moment later Mrs Bright came in search of her little niece. "Ah, you have made Miss Carruthers' acquaintance, Giles," she said, "That's right. I particularly wanted you two to meet. Persuade him to stay and see your play this evening, Miss Carruthers." And she bustled away, conscious of a hundred claims on her attention.

Vera raised her eyes, smiling sadly. What a life is this of ours! Words seemed to fall very far short of all she and Giles were thinking just then.

"I have a big operation to-morrow morning," he said gravely at last, "so I am afraid I shall have to leave before the end. Whatever happens, I must catch the last train. . . . By the way, your brother is to give the chloroform for me. I only found out quite recently that he is—your brother." His voice seemed to linger over the last words, and then he added abruptly, "I like him."

"I am so glad." Vera's eyes were full of happy

trust. "He is badly in want of a little guidance at present. . . . And now I must go. Goodbye—*Giles!*" Her voice had sunk to an inaudible whisper, but his eyes were on her face.

"Do come for a turn, Vera," said Judith almost fretfully. "Do you think we could have another rehearsal?"

"Dear girl—why? Haven't you had enough of rehearsing?"

"Things went so badly last night."

"That's a good omen. And besides we had all the accessories and lights for the first time."

"It is very odd; but I feel simply certain that something is going wrong. I never felt like this before, and you know I am not given to be nervous."

"No, indeed."

"We shall have a tremendous audience. A failure would be horrible."

"Horrible is a big word. Nobody will mind a few mistakes. We are not a theatrical training-school."

Judith shivered.

"You don't feel ill, do you, old woman?"

"No. I shall be all right when this is over; but I feel somehow as if it never would be over."

"Would you like some one else to do the prompting?"

"No, no. I undertook it. Whatever happens, I am not going to shirk my duty."

The great lecture-hall of the school lent itself well to the occasion. Its raised platform was large enough to serve as a stage, and the door leading into the retiring-room was concealed by the simple side-scenes. The walls were still in the rough, but, with the aid of a

friendly carpenter, the teachers had draped them cleverly with evergreen festoons and cheap effective fabrics. Ten minutes before the play began every seat was occupied. On the stroke of the hour there was no apparent inch of standing room. A capital little string band was to accompany the songs and dances, so the servants and their friends filled the hall outside, and seated themselves on the stair. Even in the third tier of the great theatres Judith had never felt such a sensation of *crowding*. She could hear every beat of her own heart.

But the play went charmingly. It was a bit of pure comedy, and the girls threw themselves into it with a will. Judith's office of prompter was almost a sinecure. Peal after peal of genuine laughter rang through the hall, and when the curtain rose on the final tableau, the row of beaming faces behind the footlights was a sight in itself.

In the buzz of movement and conversation, Vera made her way up to Judith. "Well," she said, "what do you think now?"

Judith drew a long breath. "That's over," she said; "and I don't think anything can go wrong with the *proverbe*. The girls were all but word-perfect before Mademoiselle left, and Nora is a jewel."

There was an interval of a quarter of an hour, during which the stage was adapted, and the "infants" said Good-night. Of course they begged to be allowed to sit up for the *proverbe*, but Mrs Bright was obdurate. The day had been one of manifold excitements, and their eyes were heavy with sleep. Moreover, when all was said, there was consolation in the thought of the custards and cake awaiting them upstairs.

Punctual to the moment the *proverbe* began,—a

graceful, expressive nothing by a modern French writer. Not one in ten of the audience understood French; but, as Judith had said, Nora Glynne was a jewel indeed,—a bewitching Irish girl with a face like an April day, and a voice so full of modulations that one could not but understand. Every muscle in her body took part in the play: it might almost have been acted in dumb show.

Little by little the audience dropped its polite air of make-believe, and rose into real appreciation. The little actress had convinced them that they understood French after all, and, when she dropped her final curtsey, she received a perfect ovation of applause.

Accustomed only to a small audience of schoolgirls, and of teachers all on their guard not to spoil her unconscious charm by undue praise, the heroine was taken by surprise, lost her self-command, curtseyed again, and then turned hastily to make her escape. In her excitement she had forgotten the flowing draperies which replaced the kilt-like skirt to which she was accustomed; she tripped, recovered herself, tripped again, and fell with all her weight against the side-scenes.

Few amateur stages would have stood such treatment. There was a friendly laugh in the auditorium at the clatter and crash which ensued, a commencing round of applause to comfort the little favourite, and then an awful pause, for a moment later the floor was a sheet of fire, and, with much noise of hissing and crackling, flames leapt up the trumpery coulisses and caught the gaudy trappings at the top.

"The lamp," cried Judith, "the lamp!"

"Is Nora safe?" asked Vera anxiously.

From her place in the opposite wing Judith had seen

the little actress escape unhurt into the dressing-room. "Yes," she said, and, taking Vera's hand, she sprang over the footlights into the hall.

In the moment that had passed since the accident the silence had given place to a scene of panic. Acting on a first impulse of terror, people had pushed the closely ranged forms backwards and forwards to make room. Protestations were followed by screams, and the few who seriously tried to control the children only seemed to add to the general noise.

"What are they *doing?*" said Judith impatiently. "Why can't they bring water—those who have got out? And why can't they keep calm?" Suddenly the thought flashed upon her that this might prove—not a mere unfortunate episode, but a great catastrophe, and the thought made her head swim.

She had often pictured herself present at a fire; had seen herself playing a great part; but imagination had formed no conception of this tumult. She felt her own voice powerless against the noise. As well might a drop in the ocean try to influence a tempest. It seemed as though she were being sucked against her will into a whirlpool of futile frenzy, for there was an awful fascination in the remorseless advance of the flames. And the confusion was infectious. She too could have run hither and thither, screaming for very fear.

She could hear Mrs Bright shrieking directions about buckets in the lobby outside, but she herself could do nothing. A seething throng of human beings separated her from the door. "We shall never get out alive," she thought, and her whole heart called out for life, life, life!

"Courage, old girl! Help me to steady the children."

It was Vera who spoke, quietly laying her hand on her sister's shoulder; but Vera's face was the most terrifying thing of all: it looked as though she might walk through the fire unhurt. And every nerve in Judith's body seemed already to feel the sting of the flames.

"Is there any hope?" she gasped, losing her self-control.

"Why, lots of hope. If only one could make oneself heard!"

A moment later, through a mist of smoke, they saw Mr Raeburn mount the great mantel-shelf half-way down the hall. His face was pale and tense, but obviously reassuring. "Quietly, boys," he said. "Quietly! We shall all get out if you act like men."

His voice seemed to fill the room. The commotion lessened for very shame. Everyone seemed to feel that a man had taken the helm.

Hope sprang up afresh in Judith's heart. How good life was!—how full,—how sweet! But the hope was only a hope, for the decorations of the hall held out welcoming arms to the flames, and the heat at the stage end was becoming unendurable. There was no escape through the dressing-room. She realized that, in the nature of the case, she and Vera must be the last to leave the hall. It was awful to think that life hung on the control Mr Raeburn could maintain over the people. He was holding his own,—gaining ground perhaps. His quiet strength was communicating itself to others——

"We shall escape," Judith thought, "we shall escape!"

And then, in the twinkling of an eye, came the thought of the children upstairs. They were unhurt as yet; but would they remain unhurt till the hall was

cleared? It seemed impossible. . . . Had anyone else thought of them? . . . Should she shout, "The children!" No: that would be to counteract Mr Raeburn's work and start the panic afresh. It would be long before she could reach the farther door: the nearer door was already a sheet of fire. The deserted dressing-room was full of inflammable rubbish. It seemed to Judith that already she could hear the roar of the flames up the great stairway.

Should she speak to Vera? At that moment Vera suddenly looked at her, and from her to the stage door.

"It's impossible," said Judith. "Wait. There is plenty of time."

"As soon as you get out," said Vera quickly, "take one or two people round below the dormitory windows."

"Vera . . . !"

But Vera had had her say. Small need to argue about this, after all she had come through. "The next step" was clear enough now. There might be no necessity for it, and at best it was only a chance; but it was the one thing in all the world to be done.

A heavy white cloak, lined with fur, hung over the back of a chair. It had been used in the *proverbe.*

She threw it over her head, slipped her hands into the roomy sleeves, and sprang through the flaming doorway.

CHAPTER LII.

THE LAST MEETING.

Dr Willoughby dropped somewhat wearily into the corner seat of the railway carriage.

What a to-do it had been to be sure! And what a capable woman his sister was! It was astonishing how time had rounded off her angles. He was glad to find himself on such friendly terms with her again,—glad that he had given up one precious day for old sake's sake.

And then he fell to thinking of one who was not his sister.

The train was late in starting, and, lifting his eyes to look at the station clock, he saw a red glare in the sky.

"What's that?" he asked sharply of a porter who stood near.

The man turned slowly, and it seemed long before he said—

"Seems as if it was a fire, sir."

"I hope not." There was a ring of anxiety in the doctor's voice. "Where do you suppose it is?"

This time the man's answer was longer still in coming.

"Can't say, I'm sure, sir." Then, after a pause, "You don't think it can be the new school?"

The lines on the doctor's brow were very deep. He rose,—sat down again,—then rose with an air of determination. "Tell the stationmaster," he said slowly, as he drew a card from his pocket-book, "that I shall want a special train to Edinburgh as nearly as possible at six o'clock to-morrow morning. Do you understand?" And, springing from the carriage, he ran as he had not run since the old days at St Vincent.

Already there was a stir, a murmur of excitement in the silent streets. Others were running, though not so swiftly as he. From time to time the glare was hidden by buildings close at hand; but it reappeared in a moment, and then by degrees came the sickening smell of smoke and charring beams, the crackle of wood and the ringing clatter of glass, the welcome *hiss* from the tardy engine.

No fear of taking the wrong turn. Quite a crowd of men and boys were keeping pace with him now—some laughing as they ran, for excitements were rare in that quiet old town,—and so he reached the school.

The scene came back to him next day—the black shrubs, the blacker figures in the foreground, the weird illumination and wreaths of smoke, the fierce jets of steam; but at the time he saw none of these things.

A fire-escape was placed against the wall, and the enthralled crowd was shouting encouragement to a fireman who was forcing his way through a wall of smoke and flame. "Bravo!" they called. "Courage, man!" "God help him!" "Ay, and God is helping him!" Then the shouts seemed to die away in a quavering sob of suspense.

There was an awful pause, broken only by a few deep gasping breaths and a word of hysterical prayer, and

then a great thrilling cheer went up as the hero reappeared carrying the figure of a woman as lightly as if she had been a child.

At that moment Mrs Bright caught sight of her brother. He would scarcely have recognised the smiling matron of an hour before. "Giles!" she said. "Thank God you have come back! How did you know?" It seemed incredible that Dr Willoughby had merely walked to the station and back. "The children are all safe, thank God! but I am afraid Miss Carruthers is dreadfully hurt."

And Giles feared so too, as he looked at the unconscious form in the fireman's arms. He seemed to have known all along that it *was* Miss Carruthers of whom the man was in search.

But whatever he may have felt, his presence brought a great calm upon all the others. No cordon of police was needed when Dr Willoughby was there.

"Vera," Judith was sobbing, as she knelt on the grass by her sister's side. "Can you hear me? I was always proud of you—always proud of you, Vera."

Dr Willoughby laid a strong, kind hand on her shoulder. "Run to the lodge," he said quietly, "and get a bed ready with blankets and plenty of hot bottles or bricks." He stooped to make a brief examination, and then, with almost the practised ease of the fireman himself, he raised the limp still figure in his arms. And the crowd stood quietly back to let them pass.

His mind was focussed on the present moment, on the things that ought to be done, if only as a forlorn hope; but somewhere, strangely clear, was a vision of turquoise sea, framed by fantastic pines, and, on a great horizontal bough, the quaintest figure of a girl he had ever beheld——

Judith and Mrs Raeburn were busy at the lodge. Their eyes looked the question they dared not ask, but the doctor did not seem to see.

"Bring the hot bottles," he said, "as quickly as you can," but there was no ring of hope, nor even of expectation, in his voice.

He carried his burden into the tiny room and laid her on the bed. Then, for a brief moment, he fastened the door and knelt down by her side.

"Vera," he said,—"my wife,—*my wife!*"

CHAPTER LIII.

THE VALUES ARE CHANGED.

WHEN Harold arrived the next day, Judith was awaiting him at the station. They were both very calm, and their hands met without a word of greeting.

"That's her sister," some one had whispered, as Judith stood alone on the platform, and now several strangers quietly lifted their hats as she passed.

There was a significance in the simple action that brought an odd, disconcerting rush of tears to Harold's eyes. It was one of the trifles that, after a great blow, bring home to our minds the thing that has happened. That very morning he had blushed with shame when the thought of Vera rose to his mind: now her name had been flashed through the length and breadth of the land, and he was a man to be pointed out with pride—because he chanced to be her brother. In a different sense from that which he had feared, the secret story of her life was writ large for all to read. Even if every trivial detail became known, the world would be slow to find flaws in gold that had passed through the furnace. Truly, as Vera had said, one lives to see the things that are not bring to nought the things that are.

The fire-brigade had done its best, and one wing of [illegible] had been saved [illegible]t, as they drew near,

the fine new school, that yesterday had worn such gala attire, looked but a poor blackened shell.

Very simply, but with quivering lips, Judith explained how it had all happened, and then they went up to her room in the untouched wing.

"The stage doorway was simply a sheet of fire," she said. "They say it is a miracle that Vera got through it alive; but she looked as calm as if she were going to teach her class on a sunny morning. She had to pass through the playroom on her way, and she picked up a hammock and half-a-dozen skipping-ropes to let the children down with. Hours after I saw one of the firemen take the thing up and examine it. 'That's workmanlike!' he said."

"And she saved all the little ones?"

"Yes." There was a queer ring of triumph in Judith's shaky voice. "Some of them are scorched and bruised a bit. A nursemaid who happened to be in the dormitory helped her, and then she let the nursemaid down, and . . . from below we could see her trying to save herself, but . . . she couldn't." Judith walked over to the window, and for a few minutes her whole figure was shaken with sobs.

"Harold," she said at last, "there is one thing I must tell you. . . . It was I who thought of the children first; but, when I looked at the sheet of flames,—I just couldn't."

His face was very grey. "I don't wonder," he said. "Poor old Judy!"

"Vera never could have got through if she hadn't thrown a heavy white cloak over her head. And then she just made a great spring." Judith laughed through a rain of tears. "I thought of the *stro*[illegible] *white wings*!"

There was a long silence. "Will you come and see her now?"

He nodded. "Is she much altered?" he asked nervously. "Her face——"

"Oh, Harold, if you had seen her face last night! You'd have felt that after all she has come through in the last weeks, she just took this in her stride . . . almost without knowing it; . . . you'd have seen"—Judith bit her lip fiercely,—"that she lived in a region—to which death has set no bound."

CHAPTER LIV.

IN HIM IS NO DARKNESS AT ALL.

HALF hidden in the great mound of flowers that covered the grave were many beautiful thoughts about the finding of life in the losing of it,—about the corn of wheat that abideth not alone; but Ruth Raeburn suggested the words that should sum up in brief the inspiration of a life.

And so on the grey granite cross there is simply a name and two dates, and below,—

"God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all."

THE END.

...TED BY W ... CKWOOD AND SONS

By the SAME AUTHOR.

WINDYHAUGH. Fourth Edition. Crown 8vo, 6s.

"'Windyhaugh' is a worthy successor to 'Mona Maclean.'......Dr Todd's latest work of fiction cannot but enhance her renown as a romancist of no less literary power than constructive ingenuity."—*Daily Telegraph.*

"A fine book......The reader finds whole vistas of his own childhood opened out."—*Outlook.*

"A kind of 'Sartor Resartus' translated into feminine and everyday terms, with a woman instead of a man as the central character.......This is a fine and masterly study of the growth of mind and character in a woman of to-day."—*Academy.*

"Wilhelmina is a thoroughly fine study.......Graham Travers has the true instinct of the novelist. She possesses something of George Eliot's faculty for plumbing the deeps of human nature. Her characters are not mere puppets; they are true types such as one has known and is familiar with.......Graham Travers reaches heights in 'Windyhaugh' that she has never attained before, and we predict for her latest book an assured success."—*St James's Gazette.*

FELLOW TRAVELLERS. Fourth Edition.
Crown 8vo, 6s.

"Graham Travers must certainly be placed in the very front rank of living women authors. In many respects she is the first of them all."—*British Weekly.*

"Marked by a freshness of idea and an individuality of treatment which place the stories very much above the ordinary level."—*Globe.*

"One expects good work from the clever author of 'Mona Maclean,' and the expectation is not disappointed in 'Fellow Travellers.'......One finds in nearly all the highly 'up-to-date' young men and women who people Graham Travers' pages a touch of poetry and chivalry which reconciles one to their culture and redeems them from priggishness."—*Spectator.*

"Miss Travers' work has an indefinable something we cannot analyse, but which deservedly sent her 'Mona Maclean' through some dozen editions."—*Times.*

"The characters have been realised and lived with, the situations are fresh and selected with judgment. 'Fellow Travellers' is to be welcomed, not only on account of its insight, but for the strenuous economy with which each line has been refined to its adequate end."—*Academy.*

By NEIL MUNRO.

DOOM CASTLE. A Romance. Second Impression.

"'Doom Castle' as a story is the best that Mr Munro has yet written, and it is written, as he alone of modern novelists can write, with an atmosphere and poetry all his own."—*Morning Post.*

"'In 'Doom Castle' we have the first essential of a great work of fiction,—a plot of growing interest.......Since 'Catriona' and 'Kidnapped' there has been no Scottish novel of more unmistakable genius."—*British Weekly.*

"A book which inspires reader and reviewer with deep gratitude and admiration.......Maintains the repute of the author of 'John Splendid' as an ingenious and vivid romancer with a just sense of the pageantry of words and a singular appreciation of the peculiar qualities of the Highlander."—*Spectator.*

"Will definitely confirm and enhance the position as a romance-writer which Mr Munro achieved by 'John Splendid.' He may now be ranked with absolute confidence among the small company of novelists whose work really counts as literature."—*Pall Mall Gazette.*

JOHN SPLENDID. The Tale of a Poor Gentleman and the Little Wars of Lorn. Sixth Edition. Crown 8vo, 6s.

"A masterly and most interesting novel."—*Times.*

"An achievement of rare merit and distinction. It is written in as pretty a style as the most fastidious could demand; and without ever ceasing to be prose there are pages of sheer poetry in which the word and the phrase are the happiest inspirations."—*Pall Mall Gazette.*

"An admirable romance."—*Athenæum.*

"Were it only for the excellence of the writing, 'John Splendid' would stand out remarkably from the common run of books."—*British Weekly.*

THE LOST PIBROCH, and other Sheiling Stories. Fourth Edition. Crown 8vo, 3s. 6d.

Mr Andrew Lang says: "In 'The Lost Pibroch' we meet genius as obvious and undeniable as that of Mr Kipling.......Mr Munro's powers are directed to old Highland life, and he does what genius alone can do—he makes it live again, and makes our imagination share its life—his knowledge being copious, original, at first hand."

"A new sort of Scots tale. There is romance, there is human nature, and there is originality in these stories."—*Pall Mall Gazette.*

"These very remarkable tales.......His work is as delicate as it is vigorous." —*Times.*

"These stories have an unmistakable touch of genius."—*British Weekly.*

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD & SONS, Edinburgh and London.

By BEATRICE HARRADEN.

UNIFORM ILLUSTRATED EDITION.

SHIPS THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT. Crown 8vo, 3s. 6d.

IN VARYING MOODS. Crown 8vo, 3s. 6d.

"Shows a remarkable advance in her art since the publication of 'Ships that Pass in the Night.'"—*Academy.*

"Brimful of human nature, and salted with a piquant wit."—*St James's Gazette.*

"Full of charm and fascination, and quite up to the mark of the writer's earlier volume."—*Guardian.*

"Miss Harraden's tales belong to that rare class which can be read twice or even thrice with satisfaction."—*Globe.*

HILDA STRAFFORD, and THE REMITTANCE MAN. Two Californian Stories. Crown 8vo, 3s. 6d.

"A very powerful story, in which the theme is handled with a mingled force and self-restraint that can only be described as masterly.......A very fine piece of work."—*Speaker.*

"Its charm is of the subtle and delicate order which cannot possibly be described."—*Graphic.*

"Miss Beatrice Harraden's talent has a certain quality of uniqueness in its delicacy and quaintness. It is at once very feminine and very original. She sees delicately, she is attracted by the more intricate complexities of temperament and character, subtly influenced environment."—*Daily News.*

"Miss Beatrice Harraden has in 'Hilda Strafford' reached a point she had not previously attained. 'Hilda Strafford' is a very finished and convincing performance; the story grows on you, it is built up bit by bit from a quite plain beginning."—*Queen.*

THE FOWLER. Crown 8vo, 3s. 6d.

"An elaborate and finished work of art; a masterpiece of psychological portraiture."—*Bookman.*

"The courting of 'The King's Arms' and 'The Punchbowl' is one of the best things in recent fiction; and Nurse Isabel, the delightful worldling, will have as many lovers as the book has readers."—*Sketch.*

"A curious piece of writing, undeniably interesting for what it is in itself and for what it reveals in the author."—*Outlook.*

"Shows no falling off either in charm or in workmanship from her previous writings. She has started her story with a clear grip on her central *motif,* and followed it up successfully to the end."—*Standard.*

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD & SONS, Edinburgh and London.

By SYDNEY C. GRIER.

CHEAP REISSUE IN PAPER COVERS, 2s. each.

Indian Historical Series.

In Furthest Ind: The Narrative of Mr Edward Carlyon.

Like Another Helen: The Letters of Miss Sylvia Freyne.

Modern East Series.

His Excellency's English Governess.

Peace with Honour.

The Warden of the Marches.

Balkan Series.

An Uncrowned King: A Romance of High Politics.

A Crowned Queen: The Romance of a Minister of State.

The Kings of the East: A Romance of the Near Future.

*** *Library Editions of the above, crown 8vo, cloth, 6s.*

LIBRARY EDITION.

THE PRINCE OF THE CAPTIVITY. By SYDNEY C. GRIER, Author of 'The Warden of the Marches,' 'The Kings of the East,' 'Peace with Honour,' &c. Crown 8vo, 6s.

IAM BLACKWOOD & SONS ND LONDON

By JOSEPH CONRAD.

LORD JIM. A Tale. Second Impression. Crown 8vo, 6s.

"We have no hesitation in pronouncing Mr Conrad's 'Lord Jim' to be the most original, remarkable, and engrossing novel of a season by no means unfruitful of excellent fiction.......We despair within the limited space at our disposal of conveying any adequate notion of the poignant interest of this strange narrative, the restrained yet fervid eloquence of the style, the vividness of the portraiture, the subtlety of psychological analysis, which are united in Mr Conrad's latest and greatest work."—*Spectator.*

"There are sufficient characters in this book, strikingly conceived, vividly described, to form a lifetime stock-in-trade for an ordinary novelist.......Its pictures of the sea in times of storm are magnificent. The record of rough life in far Eastern seaports breaks new ground."—*Punch.*

"A strong, sincere, and reticent piece of work, a human document if ever there was one, and we congratulate Mr Conrad upon a notable book."—*Daily Chronicle.*

"Clever as Mr Joseph Conrad's work has always been, he has written nothing so good.......Written by a remarkable hand, and it is a story that well deserves to live."—*Athenæum.*

"The best which Mr Conrad has yet done."—*Daily Mail.*

"It is grandiose, it is poetic, it is thoughtful; in a word, it is masterly. ......The story is powerfully enthralling."—*Daily News.*

YOUTH, AND OTHER TALES. By Joseph Conrad, Author of 'Lord Jim,' 'The Nigger of the Narcissus,' &c., &c. In 1 vol. crown 8vo. [*In the press.*

By a NEW WRITER.

MONSIEUR MARTIN: A ROMANCE OF THE GREAT SWEDISH WAR. By WYMOND CAREY. Crown 8vo, 6s.

By JOHN BUCHAN.

THE WATCHER BY THE THRESHOLD, AND OTHER TALES. By JOHN BUCHAN, Author of 'John Burnet of Barns,' &c. Crown 8vo, 6s.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD & SONS, Edinburgh and London.

By ZACK.

ON TRIAL. Second Edition. Crown 8vo, 6s.

"It seems impossible that this simple story of Devonshire folk should fail to arouse enthusiasm among students of good fiction. Its inspiration is so ample, vigorous, and fresh, and its execution so masterfully free.......As you read Zack's pages you feel, beneath the surface of expression, the strong, easy, leisurely pulse of an imagination calmly exulting in its own power."—*Academy.*

"'On Trial' is a far finer piece of work than 'Life is Life'; so fine, so quietly eloquent, so perfectly proportioned, that any extravagant expression of praise or blame seems equally out of place."—*Daily Telegraph.*

"Is something more than remarkable.......We have not read for a long time any piece of prose fiction which impressed us so much—indeed, it is a question whether any woman among those now writing in this country has done anything so masterly."—*Pall Mall Gazette.*

"One of those rare stories that stand apart from their fellows.......Tragic yet simple, true and yet not harsh, Zack's story moves inevitably towards the final page."—*Outlook.*

LIFE IS LIFE, AND OTHER TALES AND EPISODES. Second Edition. Crown 8vo, 6s.

"No one can read the least of these stories without being arrested. They are forcible, original, picturesque; the writing has quality and colour....... Our advice to the reader is unequivocal. Let him get Zack's book and read it. He will find something to delight him, whoever he is."—*Westminster Gazette.*

"We have left ourselves no space in which to speak of 'Dave,' 'Rab Vinch's Wife,' and 'The Storm,' which display the same grasp of truth that is universal, the same vividness of presentation, which, whether due to intuition and insight or to actual experience, are the life-stuff out of which great novels are created."—*Literature.*

"Take them all together, they are the best things of the sort we have had since Mr Kipling came to the front—powerful, vivid, direct, and admirably written.......It is a remarkable book, and shows that we have a new writer of short stories of uncommon strength."—*Standard.*

"This volume introduces to the reading public a new writer of extraordinary promise. The author of such a story as 'Travelling Joe' is not to be numbered among the crowd.......There are pages of exquisite tenderness and beauty, pages that no one could read unmoved. There are pages which stand unrivalled in contemporary literature."—*Bookman.*

GEORGE ELIOT'S LIFE AND WORKS.

Warwick Edition.

In Fourteen Vols. Size 4 × 6½.

Cloth, limp, gilt top, 2s. net per volume.

Imitation leather, limp, gilt top, 2s. 6d. net per volume.

Leather, limp, gilt top, with book-marker, 3s. net per volume.

Half vellum, cloth sides, gilt top, 3s. 6d. net per volume.

ADAM BEDE.

THE MILL ON THE FLOSS.

FELIX HOLT, THE RADICAL.

ROMOLA.

SCENES OF CLERICAL LIFE.

SILAS MARNER.

MIDDLEMARCH. 2 vols.

DANIEL DERONDA. 2 vols.

THE SPANISH GYPSY; JUBAL, and other Poems.

THEOPHRASTUS SUCH; ESSAYS.

GEORGE ELIOT'S LIFE. By J. W. Cross. 2 vols. With Portrait.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS, EDINBURGH AND LONDON.